The Effect of Push and Pull Motivations, Perceived Authenticity, and Satisfaction on Loyalty in Cultural Heritage Tourism: The Case of Hongcun Village in China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of push and pull motivations on perceived authenticity, satisfaction, and tourist loyalty in cultural heritage tourism. Using the S-O-R framework, we examine how different motivational drivers shape tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions. PLS-SEM was applied to survey data collected from visitors to a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in China, revealing that both push and pull motivations significantly influence perceived authenticity and satisfaction, which in turn enhance loyalty. The findings contribute to tourism research by integrating authenticity and satisfaction into the motivation-loyalty relationship, offering practical implications for destination marketers and policymakers. Understanding these dynamics can aid in designing tailored experiences that foster deeper connections and sustainable development with cultural heritage sites.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage tourism has emerged as a vital sector within the global tourism industry, attracting travelers who seek immersive and meaningful experiences deeply connected to history, culture, and tradition [1]. Defined by UNESCO, cultural heritage acts as a vital bridge between the past and present, fostering collective memory and identity among communities [2]. Beyond its role in economic development, cultural heritage tourism facilitates cultural preservation and cross-cultural understanding, benefiting both local populations and visitors [3]. However, amid globalization and swift technological progress, the dynamics of cultural heritage tourism have undergone profound changes. The increasing accessibility of global travel, coupled with shifting consumer preferences, has heightened demand for authentic and experiential tourism. Contemporary tourists no longer view cultural heritage sites as passive attractions but instead seek meaningful engagement with local traditions and communities, prioritizing experiences that contribute to personal enrichment and knowledge acquisition [4].

In response to these evolving preferences, the concept of authenticity has gained prominence in heritage tourism research. Authenticity is no longer solely defined by historical accuracy but is instead shaped by visitors' perceptions, interactions, and expectations [5]. Tourists often evaluate the authenticity of cultural heritage sites based on their personal experiences, which can be influenced by factors such as commercialization, site management strategies, and opportunities for cultural immersion [6]. Despite the increasing interest in authenticity, cultural heritage sites worldwide face challenges related to over-commercialization, where economic pressures can lead to staged or commodified representations of culture [7]. This tension between preserving authenticity and meeting commercial demands is particularly evident in China's cultural heritage tourism sector. With economic development and the expansion of the middle-class market, China has witnessed a surge in heritage tourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors [8]. However, as heritage sites experience higher tourist volumes, concerns regarding the dilution of authenticity and visitor satisfaction have intensified. Studies indicate that while a majority of cultural heritage tourists prioritize authenticity, a significant portion perceives commercialization as a factor that diminishes their overall experience, subsequently affecting their willingness to revisit heritage destinations.

Despite extensive research on cultural heritage tourism, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. Although prior research has examined the significance of authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty, this has been given to the push and pull motivations and their influence on loyalty within cultural heritage tourism. Furthermore, existing studies often focus on Western heritage tourism settings, leaving non-Western contexts, such as China, relatively underexplored. Given the increasing global significance of China's cultural heritage tourism market, there is a pressing need to examine how different motivational drivers shape tourists' perceptions of authenticity, influence their satisfaction levels, and ultimately determine their loyalty to heritage sites. Additionally, with post-pandemic tourism recovery expected to reach pre-pandemic levels, heritage sites worldwide are encountering unprecedented challenges related to overtourism. Understanding the mechanisms through which travel motivations translate into repeat visitation and destination

loyalty is essential for developing sustainable tourism management strategies.

To bridge this gap, this study investigates the impact of push/pull motivations, perceived authenticity, satisfaction on loyalty in cultural heritage sites. Despite the growing body of research on cultural heritage tourism, the role of push and pull motivations in shaping tourists' perceptions of authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty remains underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how these motivational drivers influence visitor experiences and contribute to sustainable heritage site management. The findings enrich the ongoing discussion on sustainable cultural heritage tourism by highlighting strategies that balance economic viability with cultural preservation. Moreover, this research provides actionable insights for stakeholders, including policymakers, tourism operators, and site managers, seeking to develop tourism models that foster both visitor satisfaction and long-term heritage conservation. Ultimately, by advancing knowledge on the factors driving loyalty in cultural heritage tourism, this research aspires to inform best practices that ensure the sustainability of heritage sites for future generations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 S-O-R framework

This study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell, as its theoretical foundation. This framework has been extensively used in environmental science and consumer behavior research to illustrate how external stimuli affect cognitive processes, ultimately shaping behavioral responses [9]. Given its adaptability, this study utilizes the S-O-R paradigm to heritage tourism, investigating the relationships among push/pull motivations (stimuli), perceived authenticity and satisfaction (organisms), and loyalty (response).

Within the S-O-R framework, stimulus (S) denotes external environmental influences that initiate an individual's cognitive and emotional responses [10]. Thus, in this study, push and pull motivations serve as the stimuli that shape tourists' experiences at cultural heritage sites.

The organism (O) component reflects a person's internal cognitive and emotional processes that bridge stimulus and response. In addition, tourist satisfaction represents an affective assessment of the overall tourism experience, which arises when expectations are met or exceeded [11]. Since perceived authenticity influences tourist satisfaction and subsequent behavior [12, 13], these two factors are considered the organisms in this study.

The final component, response (R), reflects the behavioral outcomes resulting from the interaction between stimulus and organism. Tourism studies often examine approach behaviors (e.g., loyalty and revisit intention) and avoidance behaviors (e.g., dissatisfaction and destination avoidance) [14, 15]. Given the lack of consensus on the exact pathways linking push/pull motivations, perceived authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty, this study seeks to clarify these relationships.

2.2 Stimuli: Push and pull motivations

Travel motivation has been regarded as a crucial influence in understanding tourist behavior and driving various travel decisions [16, 17]. Researchers have often explored questions

such as "Why do tourists travel?" or "What motivates tourists to embark on a journey?" However, due to the complexity of tourism behavior, answering these questions is not straightforward [18]. Push motivations represent internal stimuli, originating from individuals' psychological needs, such as relaxation, escape from daily life, social interaction, knowledge acquisition, and the desire to explore new experiences [19, 20]. In contrast, pull factors function as external stimuli, encompassing the attractiveness of a destination, including amenities, pricing, unique cultural atmosphere, and service quality [16]. The traditional perspective holds that push factors primarily generate the desire to travel, whereas pull factors influence the selection of specific destinations [21].

Within the S-O-R framework, push motivations serve as internal stimuli, reflecting tourists' intrinsic needs and driving their travel intentions, while pull motivations act as external stimuli, influencing their destination choices [22]. Therefore, this study, grounded in the S-O-R theory, seeks to further explore how push and pull motivations influence tourist loyalty through perceived authenticity. Thus, it contributes to advancing theoretical research in cultural heritage tourism.

Prior studies suggest that push motivations significantly influence different dimensions of authenticity [23]. Thus, we propose:

H1: *Push motivations positively and significantly influence objective authenticity.*
H2: *Push motivations positively and significantly influence constructive authenticity.*
H3: *Push motivations positively and significantly influence existential authenticity.*

While most research focuses on push motivations, pull motivations—external attractions such as cultural sites and historical ambiance—also shape tourists' authenticity perceptions [22]. However, empirical studies on pull motivations' effects on different dimensions of perceived authenticity remain limited. Addressing this gap, we propose:

H4: *Pull motivations positively and significantly influence objective authenticity.*
H5: *Pull motivations positively and significantly influence constructive authenticity.*
H6: *Pull motivations positively and significantly influence existential authenticity.*

2.3 Organisms: Perceived authenticity and satisfaction

The concept of perceived authenticity has been debated extensively, with scholars generally divided into two perspectives: one viewing authenticity as a fundamental attribute of objects and the other emphasizing its dependence on tourists' subjective experiences. In response, Wang [24] distinguishes between the authenticity of visited objects and that of tourist experiences, leading to the development of three key categories: OA, CA, and EA.

Objective authenticity (OA) is rooted in objectivist philosophy, where authenticity is assessed based on fixed criteria, typically by experts [25]. This perspective, however, has been criticized for its exclusivity, as many tourists may lack the necessary knowledge to discern authenticity [24]. Despite these critiques, empirical studies indicate that a preference for OA remains strong [26].

Constructive authenticity (CA), influenced by constructivist thought, suggests that authenticity is socially and cognitively constructed, shaped by individual expectations, cultural contexts, and symbolic meanings [24]. This perspective acknowledges that authenticity is dynamic and can evolve over time as interpretations shift [27].

Existential authenticity (EA) moves beyond the authenticity of objects and focuses on personal experiences, self-discovery, and emotional engagement [24]. Tourists may pursue authentic experiences not necessarily through historical or cultural accuracy but through personal fulfilment and meaningful interactions.

Tourist satisfaction, derived from consumer satisfaction theory, is fundamentally linked to the comparison between expectations and actual experiences [28]. A positive travel experience that meets or exceeds expectations enhances satisfaction, which in turn influences future behavioral intentions, such as loyalty and recommendation [29].

Authenticity is a key determinant of tourist satisfaction, yet prior studies offer mixed findings. Some research suggests a direct impact [30], while others highlight an indirect effect via mediating variables [31]. Given the multidimensional nature of authenticity (objective, constructive, existential), we propose:

H7: *OA positively and significantly influences satisfaction.*
H8: *CA positively and significantly influences satisfaction.*
H9: *EA positively and significantly influences satisfaction.*

Tourist motivations play a crucial role in shaping satisfaction [32]. While Yoon and Uysal [20] find push motivations unrelated to satisfaction, more recent studies suggest both push and pull motivations significantly influence satisfaction [33]. Thus, we hypothesize:

H10: *Push motivations positively and significantly influence*

satisfaction.
H11: *Pull motivations positively and significantly influence satisfaction.*

2.4 Response: Loyalty

Loyalty, as a key response in the S-O-R framework, represents tourists' behavioral and attitudinal commitment to a destination. Tourist loyalty is multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and conative aspects, reflecting tourists' destination-related knowledge, affective attachment, and behavioral intentions [34]. Given its predictive power for future behavior, loyalty serves as a crucial outcome variable in cultural heritage tourism, influenced by perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction [14, 35].

Studies linking motivations to loyalty offer conflicting findings. Some suggest push motivations directly enhance loyalty [20], while others find pull motivations more influential [33]. To explore these relationships, we propose:

H12: *Push motivations positively and significantly influence loyalty.*
H13: *Pull motivations positively and significantly influence loyalty.*

Authenticity is increasingly recognized as a driver of loyalty, though findings vary across studies. While some research confirms strong effects [36, 37], others report mixed results across different authenticity dimensions [22]. Based on prior literature, we propose:

H14: *OA positively and significantly influences loyalty.*
H15: *CA positively and significantly influences loyalty.*
H16: *EA positively and significantly influences loyalty.*
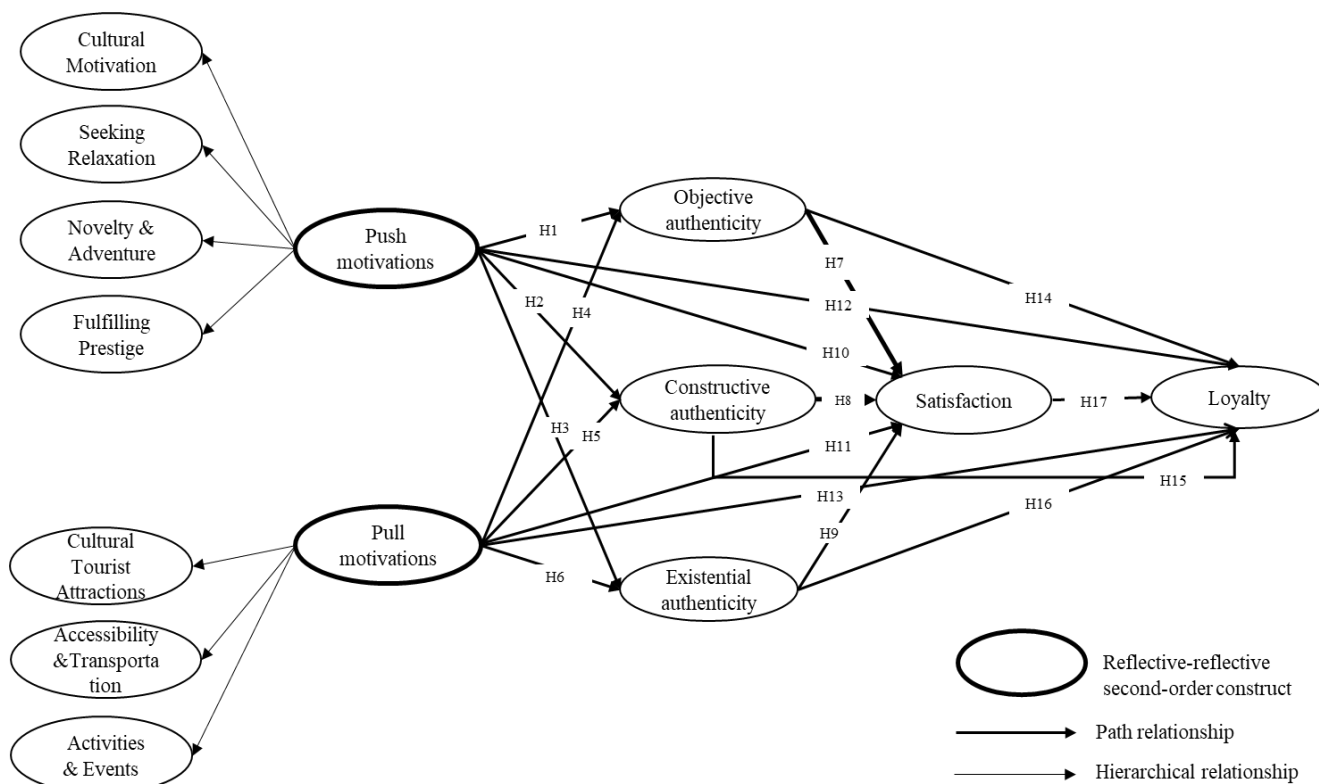

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

In marketing and tourism research, satisfaction is widely recognized as a key antecedent of loyalty [38]. Studies in heritage tourism confirm this positive relationship [39, 40]. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H17: *Satisfaction positively and significantly influences loyalty.*

2.5 Conceptual framework

The present study extends the research framework of Kolar and Zabkar [37] by addressing its key limitations and advancing the conceptual understanding of travel motivations, perceived authenticity, and tourist satisfaction in cultural heritage tourism, as shown in Figure 1.

First, instead of solely considering cultural motivation as a push factor, this study refines the conceptualization of travel motivations by incorporating both push and pull motivations, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of tourists' decision-making processes. This refinement is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where leisure tourists, rather than strictly defined cultural tourists, dominate the visitor profile of heritage sites.

Second, this study further differentiates object-based authenticity into OA and CA, addressing the conceptual gap in Kolar and Zabkar's [37] model, which did not explicitly distinguish these two dimensions.

Third, this study considers satisfaction as the organism component, addressing the limitation of prior research that directly linked perceived authenticity to loyalty.

These developments deepen the theoretical basis of cultural heritage tourism research by offering context-specific framework that highlights the influence of travel motivations on tourists' perceptions and behaviors.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research area

Hongcun Village, located in the northeastern part of Yixian County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, is a well-preserved ancient village with a history dating back to 1131 CE. Recognized as a World Cultural Heritage Site in 2000, it has since gained national and international recognition for its cultural and historical significance [41].

This study selects Hongcun as the research site due to its rich cultural heritage, architectural authenticity, and strong appeal as a tourist destination. As a highly frequented cultural heritage site in China, Hongcun draws both domestic and international visitors, making it an ideal case for exploring the impact of push and pull motivations on perceived authenticity, satisfaction, and loyalty. The village's unique blend of historical significance and tourism development provides a valuable context for understanding tourist behavior in cultural heritage tourism.

Between August and November 2024, a formal survey was carried out at Hongcun Village using an on-site random sampling method. Ultimately, 600 valid questionnaires were successfully gathered.

3.2 Measurement

Push motivations were designed as a reflective-reflective construct comprising four first-order dimensions: Cultural Motivation, Seeking Relaxation, Novelty/Adventure, and Fulfilling Prestige. These dimensions were measured using established scales from prior studies [33, 37, 42]. Pull motivations were also modelled as a reflective-reflective construct with three first-order dimensions: Cultural Tourist Attractions, Accessibility & Transportation, and Activities & Events. These dimensions are measured using established scales from prior studies [33, 42, 43]. OA items were based on Kolar and Zabkar [37] and Seyitoğlu et al. [44], while CA items were drawn from Seyitoğlu et al. [44]. EA items were primarily adapted from Yildiz et al. [13] and Seyitoğlu et al. [44]. Satisfaction was assessed using four items reflecting time and effort investment, travel expectations, emotional response, and overall contentment, adapted from recent heritage tourism studies [13, 45]. These measurement items were developed based on the latest research in the field. Moreover, loyalty was evaluated through four items: recommend intention, word-of-mouth, revisit intention, and willingness to share experiences. The first three items were drawn from Eck et al. [46], while the sharing intention measure was sourced from Vinh et al. [47].

After developing the initial questionnaire, each item was carefully reviewed to enhance content validity. A pretest was conducted through an on-site survey targeting domestic tourists, yielding a total of 60 responses. The primary objective was to assess the clarity and accuracy of the questionnaire items. Based on the feedback and analysis, necessary refinements were made. Ultimately, the final questionnaire comprised 48 measurement items, assessed using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Additionally, demographic factors like age, gender, and education level were included.

3.3 Data analysis

This study applied two statistical techniques for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze respondents' demographic traits and travel patterns. PLS-SEM was selected for model evaluation for several reasons. PLS-SEM is well-suited for handling complex models and operates without strict normality constraints. Furthermore, based on threshold sample requirements, the ten-times rule, and statistical power analysis, 600 samples were deemed sufficient [48]. SmartPLS 4.1 was used to evaluate both the measurement and structural models.

4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

4.1 Demographic results

The sample's demographic and travel characteristics are presented in Table 1. The demographic profile of the respondents was analyzed based on gender, age, education level, occupation, travel companions, and number of visits.

Among the 600 participants, 63.4% respondents were female and 36.7% were male. In terms of age distribution, nearly half of them (41.5%) were between 36 and 45 years old, followed by 26–35 years old (22.5%), 46–55 years old (21.7%), 18–25 years old (12%), and only 2.3% were 56 years old or above.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants (n=600)

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	380	63.4%
Male	220	36.7%
Age		
18 – 25	72	12%
26 – 35	135	22.5%
36 – 45	249	41.5%
46 – 55	130	21.7%
56 above	14	2.3%
Education		
High school	40	6.7%
Associate degree	175	29.2%
Bachelor's degree	278	46.3%
Postgraduate (Master/Ph.D.)	107	17.8%
Occupation		
Employed	409	66.4%
Self-employed	87	14.1%
Freelancer	48	7.8%
Retired	26	4.2%
Student	28	4.5%
Other	2	0.3%
Companions		
Alone	88	14.7%
With spouse	302	53.3%
With my family	132	22%
With friend(s)	60	10%
With tour members	12	2%
Other	6	1%
Frequency of Visit		
First time	520	86.7%
Twice	76	12.7%
Third Times or more	4	0.6%

Regarding educational background, approximately 46.3% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, while 29.2% had an associate degree, 17.8% had a postgraduate degree (Master/Ph.D.), and 6.7% had completed high school or technical school. In terms of occupation, 66.4% were employed, 14.1% were self-employed or freelancers, 7.8% were retired, 4.2% were students, and a small percentage (4.5%) fell into other categories.

For travel companions, 53.3% traveled with a spouse or significant other, 22% with family members, 10% with friends, 2% as part of an organized tour, 1% with other companions, and 14.7% traveled alone. This indicates that the majority of travelers preferred to share their experience with close companions rather than traveling in large groups. Additionally, the data suggests that solo travel, while less common, still accounts for a notable portion of visitors.

Lastly, the majority (86.7%) were first-time visitors, while 12.7% had visited twice, and only 0.6% had visited three or more times.

4.2 Assessment of measurement model

Internal consistency was verified as α and CR surpassed the recommended 0.70 thresholds, indicating strong reliability across all constructs. Convergent validity was established, as all factor loadings were greater than 0.70, and the average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed 0.50, demonstrating that the items effectively measured their respective constructs (Table 2). Discriminant validity was evaluated using the HTMT, ensuring that the constructs were empirically distinct (results in research results file). The results confirmed that all HTMT values were below the threshold of 0.85.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity

Constructs/Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
Cultural Motivation (CM)		0.821	0.822	0.651
CM1	0.807			
CM2	0.809			
CM3	0.792			
CM4	0.818			
Seeking Relaxation (SR)		0.798	0.803	0.624
SR1	0.754			
SR2	0.827			
SR3	0.827			
SR4	0.748			
Novelty & Adventure (NA)		0.761	0.761	0.676
NA1	0.781			
NA2	0.845			
NA3	0.840			
Fulfilling Prestige (FP)		0.787	0.791	0.610
FP1	0.747			
FP2	0.820			
FP3	0.780			
FP4	0.776			
Cultural Tourist Attraction (CAT)		0.770	0.773	0.591
CAT1	0.738			
CAT2	0.791			
CAT3	0.751			
CAT4	0.793			
Accessibility & Transportation (AAT)		0.791	0.799	0.615
AAT1	0.756			
AAT2	0.837			
AAT3	0.805			
AAT4	0.735			
Activities & Events (AAE)		0.822	0.830	0.737
AAE1	0.828			
AAE2	0.890			
AAE3	0.857			
Objective Authenticity (OA)		0.782	0.787	0.534
OA1	0.750			
OA2	0.773			
OA3	0.707			
OA4	0.710			
OA5	0.713			
Constructive Authenticity (CA)		0.794	0.796	0.619
CA1	0.780			
CA2	0.813			
CA3	0.793			
CA4	0.759			
Existential Authenticity (EA)		0.864	0.868	0.648
EA1	0.773			
EA2	0.837			
EA3	0.796			
EA4	0.821			
EA5	0.795			
Satisfaction (SAT)		0.759	0.761	0.580
SAT1	0.792			
SAT2	0.727			
SAT3	0.740			
SAT4	0.785			

Loyalty (LOY)			0.860	0.860	0.705
LOY1	0.849				
LOY2	0.824				
LOY3	0.835				
LOY4	0.850				

The assessment of second-order constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity. Internal consistency was ensured, with all α and CR values surpassing the recommended 0.70 threshold. Convergent validity was established through AVE exceeding 0.50, demonstrating that the second-order constructs adequately captured the variance of their respective first-order constructs. The standardized loadings of the first-order constructs on their corresponding second-order constructs were all above 0.70, further supporting the measurement model's robustness, as presented in the research results file.

4.3 Assessment of structural model

The structural model was evaluated using path coefficients (β), S.E., and p-values. Among the 17 hypotheses, 13 were supported, while 4 were rejected, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of hypotheses

No.	Paths	β	S.E.	p-Value	Result
H1	PushM→OA	0.682	0.039	0.000	Accepted
H2	PushM→CA	0.399	0.039	0.000	Accepted
H3	PushM→EA	0.366	0.041	0.000	Accepted
H4	PullM→OA	0.048	0.040	0.229	Rejected
H5	PullM→CA	0.373	0.041	0.000	Accepted
H6	PullM→EA	0.438	0.038	0.000	Accepted
H7	OA→SAT	0.166	0.040	0.000	Accepted
H8	CA→SAT	0.167	0.043	0.000	Accepted
H9	EA→SAT	0.241	0.046	0.000	Accepted
H10	PushM→SAT	0.318	0.055	0.000	Accepted
H11	PullM→SAT	0.064	0.043	0.139	Rejected
H12	PushM→LOY	0.007	0.054	0.898	Rejected
H13	PullM→LOY	0.090	0.044	0.040	Accepted
H14	OA→LOY	0.042	0.043	0.327	Rejected
H15	CA→LOY	0.141	0.043	0.001	Accepted
H16	EA→LOY	0.377	0.052	0.000	Accepted
H17	SAT→LOY	0.235	0.053	0.000	Accepted

The structural model assessment revealed that push motivations significantly influenced objective authenticity (H1: β = 0.682, p < 0.001), constructive authenticity (H2: β = 0.399, p < 0.001), and existential authenticity (H3: β = 0.366, p < 0.001), supporting these hypotheses. Similarly, pull motivations significantly affected constructive authenticity (H5: β = 0.373, p < 0.001) and existential authenticity (H6: β = 0.438, p < 0.001). However, its effect on objective authenticity was non-significant (H4: β = 0.048, p = 0.229), leading to the rejection of H4. Regarding satisfaction, objective authenticity (H7: β = 0.166, p < 0.001), constructive authenticity (H8: β = 0.167, p < 0.001), and existential authenticity (H9: β = 0.241, p < 0.001) all had significant positive effects, supporting these hypotheses. Additionally, push motivations significantly influenced satisfaction (H10: β = 0.318, p < 0.001), whereas pull motivations did not (H11: β = 0.064, p = 0.139), resulting in the rejection of H11. In terms of loyalty, push motivations had no significant effect (H12: β = 0.007, p = 0.898), rejecting this hypothesis, whereas pull motivations significantly influenced loyalty (H13: β = 0.090, p = 0.040), supporting H13. Moreover, objective authenticity did not significantly impact loyalty (H14: β = 0.042, p = 0.328),

leading to its rejection, while constructive authenticity (H15: β = 0.141, p = 0.001) and existential authenticity (H16: β = 0.377, p < 0.001) both had significant positive effects, supporting these hypotheses. Finally, satisfaction was found to be a significant predictor of loyalty (H17: β = 0.235, p < 0.001), confirming this relationship.

These results indicate that push motivations play a crucial role in shaping authenticity perceptions and satisfaction, whereas pull motivations have a more limited impact, particularly on objective authenticity and satisfaction. Additionally, existential authenticity emerged as a key driver of both satisfaction and loyalty, highlighting its importance in cultural heritage tourism experiences.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Compared to findings from other studies, our results indicate that EA plays a more dominant role than CA and OA in shaping visitor satisfaction and loyalty in cultural heritage tourism. Among the three dimensions, OA exerts the least influence on both satisfaction and loyalty.

To explain this phenomenon, we identify three key factors that contribute to the dominant role of EA in cultural heritage tourism:

(1) The status quo of China's cultural heritage tourism

China's cultural heritage tourism developed relatively late, largely influenced by the country's accession to the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.* As of July 2024, China has 59 UNESCO-listed heritage sites, ranking second globally. These sites serve as important symbols of national cultural soft power and attract significant domestic and international tourism. However, many of them gained prominence not due to their World Heritage status, but rather because they were designated as 5A scenic areas—China's highest-rated tourist attractions. This reflects a lack of effective heritage branding and suggests that public awareness of cultural heritage as a distinct tourism category remains limited [49].

Over-commercialization further challenges authenticity perceptions. Many heritage sites have been turned into shopping districts, and cultural performances are often staged for tourists, diminishing their authenticity. Additionally, inappropriate tourist behaviors, such as climbing on ancient relics, carving inscriptions, and feeding wildlife, highlight a lack of heritage awareness [50].

In turn, the Chinese government has implemented policies, such as the 2018 State Council's Directive on Cultural Heritage Protection and Utilization, to balance heritage preservation and tourism development. These policies emphasize "developing while protecting, and protecting while developing," advocating for smart tourism, immersive experiences, and visitor education. However, the public's engagement with heritage sites remains driven by experience rather than historical knowledge, reinforcing the dominant role of EA over OA and CA.

(2) The pursuit of Chinese tourists in cultural heritage tourism

Unlike OA and CA, which rely on external validation of authenticity, EA is an inward process, allowing tourists to experience self-awareness and identity affirmation through interaction with cultural heritage sites [24]. For many Chinese tourists, particularly in the experience-driven tourism era, visiting a cultural heritage site is not just about learning history—it is an opportunity for personal connection and

emotional fulfillment [51].

As China's middle class has grown, tourism preferences have shifted toward self-exploration, immersive engagement, and emotional depth. Instead of prioritizing the historical accuracy of a site, visitors now seek experiences that feel real to them [51]. This explains why EA has become the primary driver of visitor satisfaction and loyalty—tourists value how a place makes them feel, rather than just its historical authenticity.

The rise of experiential travel further strengthens the dominance of EA. Visitors are no longer content with simply seeing a historic site; they want to touch, participate, and immerse themselves in cultural activities that foster a sense of belonging. While OA and CA provide historical and contextual depth, they do not address the emotional and psychological dimensions of cultural heritage experiences in the way EA does.

(3) The case of Hongcun Village

Although Hongcun was inscribed as a WCHS in 2000, its promotional strategies have not prominently emphasized its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). Upon entering the village, visitors encounter only a relatively inconspicuous World Cultural Heritage Site plaque at the main entrance, and the site's marketing predominantly highlights its natural scenery and Huizhou-style architecture rather than its cultural heritage significance. Consequently, field research indicated that the majority of surveyed visitors are unaware of Hongcun Village's world heritage status.

The village's World Heritage status is primarily attributed to its unique water system rather than merely the presence of well-preserved ancient architecture. Ingeniously designed, Hongcun's water system integrates ecological, functional, and cultural-symbolic dimensions. Comprising streams, Moon Pond, and South Lake, this system facilitates internal water circulation while serving multiple purposes, including water supply, fire prevention, irrigation, and aesthetic enhancement. More importantly, its layout is deeply rooted in the principles of Feng Shui, symbolizing prosperity and well-being. The orientation of residential buildings follows the flow of water to maintain an auspicious balance, reinforcing the water system as not only an infrastructural necessity but also a fundamental element of the village's cultural identity.

Instead of evaluating whether Hongcun Village strictly adheres to its historical appearance (OA) or a curated cultural identity (CA), visitors focus on their sense of participation and engagement within the environment, reinforcing EA as the most influential form of authenticity.

These factors collectively explain why EA exerts a stronger influence on visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty compared to OA and CA. While OA and CA provide recognition and historical depth for cultural heritage sites, they fail to meet the evolving demands of contemporary Chinese tourists and the current development trends of cultural heritage tourism in China. In contrast, EA aligns with tourists' desire for immersive experiences, self-exploration, and emotional connection, making it the primary driver of engagement in China's cultural heritage tourism.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study, based on the S-O-R framework, investigates the direct effects of push motivations, pull motivations, perceived authenticity, and satisfaction on tourist loyalty. By incorporating three types of authenticity—OA, CA, and EA—this study develops a theoretical model that provides a novel perspective on cultural heritage tourism research.

First, this study, grounded in the S-O-R framework, reveals the differential effects of push and pull motivations on perceived authenticity. The findings indicate that push motivations have significant impacts on OA, CA, and EA, whereas pull motivations positively affect only CA and EA, with no impact on OA. These results suggest that tourists' intrinsic drives play a key influence in shaping authenticity perceptions, making them more likely to recognize the historical authenticity of cultural heritage sites while also CA based on personal understanding and social consensus [52]. Furthermore, push motivations reflect tourists' internal psychological needs, such as self-exploration, curiosity, and cultural identity, which drive them to actively engage with the heritage environment and enhance their perception of EA through personal experiences and contextual understanding. In contrast, pull motivations, driven by external environmental factors, primarily shape tourists' subjective construction of cultural experiences and situational perceptions but are insufficient to influence their recognition of the OA of cultural heritage sites. Although the S-O-R framework emphasizes that external stimuli (S) can influence the organism (O), different types of stimuli may have varying effects on different organisms. As an external stimulus (S), pull motivation influences tourists' psychological states and perceptual abilities (O); however, the perception of OA largely depends on an individual's historical knowledge and cultural literacy rather than being directly shaped by external environmental factors [53]. In psychology, Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) posits that an individual's emotional response depends on how they evaluate a given situation or event [54]. Johnson and Stewart [55] further emphasize that the cognitive appraisal process is subjective, relying on an individual's personal interpretation of information rather than the objective characteristics of external stimuli. In other words, when assessing the authenticity of cultural heritage, tourists do not solely depend on external environmental stimuli but rather on their pre-existing knowledge systems, cultural background, and the alignment of the experience with their personal goals [56]. This finding extends the application of the S-O-R framework in cultural heritage tourism research by demonstrating that the influence of external stimuli (S) on OA is indirect and that the cognitive appraisal process is the key determinant of OA perception. This also further reinforces the critical role of push motivation in shaping OA.

Second, this study, under the S-O-R framework, examines the effects of push and pull motivations and perceived authenticity on tourist satisfaction. The results demonstrate that push motivations, OA, CA, and EA all have significant positive effects on satisfaction, with push motivations exerting the strongest influence, followed by EA. However, the effect of pull motivations on satisfaction is not significant. These findings suggest that tourist satisfaction is primarily driven by internal motivations and reinforced through perceptions of different dimensions of authenticity, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies [13, 57]. Notably, EA plays a [13, 42] critical role in shaping satisfaction, highlighting that tourists in cultural heritage tourism contexts are more inclined to achieve deeper authenticity experiences through direct engagement and contextual understanding, which, in turn,

enhances overall satisfaction. This finding enriches the understanding of heritage tourism experiences and further extends the applicability of the S-O-R framework in this domain, providing theoretical support for improving tourist satisfaction in cultural heritage tourism destinations.

Finally, this study explores the effect of push/pull motivations, perceived authenticity, and satisfaction on loyalty. The results show that push motivations have no significant effect on tourist loyalty, whereas pull motivations exert a significant positive influence. Among the three types of authenticity, OA does not significantly affect loyalty, while EA exerts a significant positive influence. Additionally, satisfaction is a strong predictor of loyalty. In the S-O-R process, the translation of O → R often depends on the strength and nature of the psychological response [9]. OA is a relatively passive cognitive appraisal, which may enhance a tourists' intellectual understanding of a site but does not actively engage their psychological response. In contrast, factors such as EA and SAT, which evoke deeper personal meaning and positive emotional reinforcement, are more effective in driving repeat visitation and loyalty-related behaviors. From the perspective of Experience Economy Theory (EET), loyalty is primarily driven by emotional engagement and immersive experiences [58]. While OA provides a rational validation of historical accuracy, it lacks the affective depth needed to foster strong loyalty [13]. In cultural heritage tourism, tourists develop loyalty through personal connections, sensory engagement, and emotional resonance, making EA and SAT stronger predictors of repeat visits. Since OA does not create immersive or transformative experiences, its insignificant impact on loyalty aligns with EET's premise that emotional fulfillment, rather than factual correctness, is the key to long-term tourist commitment. This discovery carries significant insights for utilizing the S-O-R framework, indicating that, in the context of cultural heritage tourism, tourists' loyalty is more influenced by their satisfaction and profound experiences related to EA rather than merely by historical authenticity or personal travel motivations.

Overall, the findings of this study emphasize the pivotal roles of EA and satisfaction in shaping tourist loyalty. By deepening the application of the S-O-R framework in cultural heritage tourism, this study provides essential theoretical insights for the management and marketing of cultural heritage sites. The results suggest that tourists' continued commitment and loyalty to cultural heritage destinations are driven not only by their overall satisfaction but also by their profound engagement with existential authenticity. This study further elucidates the mechanisms underlying tourist loyalty formation, offering new theoretical perspectives and practical implications for enhancing tourist loyalty in cultural heritage tourism destinations.

6.2 Practical implications

The relationship between push and pull motivations and perceived authenticity, as well as effects on tourist satisfaction and loyalty, provides important practical implications for the management of WCHSs. The findings indicate that push motivation has the most significant impact on tourist satisfaction, while EA plays a crucial role in both satisfaction and loyalty. These results suggest that heritage sites should not only stimulate tourists' intrinsic motivations but also enhance their authenticity experiences through various means to increase overall satisfaction and loyalty.

Firstly, satisfaction and existential authenticity are essential factors influencing tourist loyalty. Tourists' loyalty is not solely determined by their recognition of the historical authenticity of a site (OA) or their socially constructed perceptions (CA), but rather by their actual experiences within the heritage site. Thus, site managers should focus on deepening tourists' engagement by offering more interactive activities, cultural participation programs, and immersive guided experiences. These strategies can enhance tourists' sense of existential authenticity, foster emotional connections, and strengthen their sense of belonging, thereby improving their loyalty.

Secondly, in terms of enhancing tourist satisfaction, push motivation plays the most critical role, highlighting the importance of tourists' intrinsic drivers in shaping their satisfaction. Therefore, heritage sites should focus on stimulating tourists' internal motivations, such as cultural interest, curiosity, exploration, and relaxation. While EA significantly contributes to satisfaction, this does not imply that OA and CA are insignificant. Instead, a holistic approach should be adopted to ensure a multidimensional authenticity experience. For example, heritage sites should preserve historical authenticity while integrating modern technology and storytelling techniques to enhance constructive authenticity. Moreover, cultural activities and deep engagement opportunities should be provided to reinforce EA, ensuring a balanced development of all three authenticity dimensions.

Finally, although intrinsic motivation drives tourists to visit heritage sites, their loyalty is primarily influenced by external attractions. Therefore, site managers should consider tourists' needs and enhance destination image, improve tourism infrastructure, and refine the overall visitor experience to encourage both first-time visits and repeat visits. Additionally, effective marketing strategies—such as developing thematic cultural routes, introducing immersive exhibitions, and strengthening social media engagement—can help increase the attractiveness of heritage sites and enhance tourist loyalty.

Overall, this study's practical implications emphasize the importance of simultaneously addressing tourists' intrinsic motivations and external attractions while fostering a comprehensive authenticity experience. By optimizing cultural presentation, enhancing interactive experiences, improving infrastructure, and strengthening marketing efforts, heritage site managers can provide a more profound and enriching tourism experience, thereby enhancing the long-term competitiveness of WCHS.

6.3 Policy implications

Government interventions play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of heritage tourism, particularly in balancing economic benefits with cultural preservation. In the case of Hongcun, both national and local governments implement policies and strategies to regulate tourism development, protect cultural heritage, and promote sustainable practices.

At the national level, China has established a comprehensive legal and policy framework to support heritage conservation and sustainable tourism. The *World Cultural Heritage Protection and Management Regulations* launched in 2006 provide the legal foundation for safeguarding UNESCO-listed heritage sites. These regulations emphasize the principles of "protection first, rescue as a priority, rational

utilization, and enhanced management" to ensure the authenticity and integrity of world cultural heritage [59]. The policy mandates that local governments incorporate heritage protection into their regional development plans and allocate financial resources for conservation efforts. Additionally, the 14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development (2021-2025) emphasizes sustainable tourism, highlighting the need for ecological protection, controlled visitor flow, and digital monitoring systems for heritage sites [60].

China has also aligned its heritage management strategies with international standards, particularly through its collaboration with UNESCO. The China National Commission for UNESCO works to ensure that World Heritage Sites, adhere to the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which require periodic monitoring and reporting on conservation efforts. Furthermore, the National Cultural and Tourism Bureau has launched initiatives to integrate cultural heritage with rural revitalization, encouraging the development of community-led tourism models that prioritize authenticity and sustainability [59].

At the local level, the Huangshan Municipal Government and Yi County authorities have implemented various policies to regulate tourism and heritage conservation in Hongcun. One of the key policies is *The Protection and Development Plan for Xidi and Hongcun* (2006–2020), which establishes zoning regulations to restrict construction and commercial activities within core heritage areas. This plan aims to maintain the architectural integrity and cultural landscape of the village while preventing excessive commercialization [61]. Furthermore, local authorities have established the Heritage Site Management Committee and the Heritage Protection Inspection Team, both of which play a crucial role in overseeing conservation efforts, enforcing regulatory compliance, and addressing emerging challenges related to heritage tourism [62]. Moreover, the regional government has partnered with academic institutions, such as Huangshan Tourism College and Sun Yat-sen University's School of Tourism, as well as research centers to conduct cultural impact assessments and pilot projects for smart tourism. These initiatives utilize digital tools like VR and AR to improve visitor experiences while minimizing physical disturbances to heritage structures [63].

These multi-level governmental interventions illustrate a structured approach to heritage tourism sustainability. National policies provide a legal and strategic framework, ensuring that heritage sites like Hongcun align with global conservation standards, while local policies focus on practical implementation, addressing site-specific challenges and fostering community engagement. Moving forward, integrating digital monitoring, strengthening environmental protection measures, and enhancing local stakeholder participation will be critical in maintaining the harmony between tourism growth and cultural heritage conservation.

6.4 Limitations

This research presents certain limitations, which provide recommendations for future research. Firstly, this study employed a quantitative research approach, using survey data and statistical analyses to examine the relationships among key variables. While quantitative research effectively identifies causal relationships, it may have limitations in capturing the underlying psychological mechanisms and multidimensional experiences associated with perceived authenticity. Future research could consider adopting a mixed-methods approach by integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how tourists perceive authenticity and how it influences their satisfaction and loyalty. Secondly, this study focused on World Cultural Heritage Sites as its research context, exploring how tourists' perceived authenticity shapes their satisfaction and loyalty in this specific setting. However, World Heritage sites encompass various categories, including World Natural Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, and Mixed World Heritage sites. Different types of heritage sites may evoke distinct perceptions of authenticity, which could lead to variations in their impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Future research could extend the scope to other types of heritage sites to validate and generalize the theoretical model proposed in this study. Finally, this study examined only tourists' perspectives, yet perceptions of authenticity may be shaped by multiple factors, including local residents' cultural heritage practices, site management strategies, and social interactions. In cultural heritage tourism, local residents not only serve as key stakeholders but also actively participate in the construction of authenticity. Therefore, future research could incorporate local residents' perspectives to explore their perceptions of authenticity and how these interact with tourists' perceptions. Such an approach would provide a more holistic understanding of authenticity in heritage tourism and offer more targeted management recommendations for the sustainable development of heritage sites.

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