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Heritage Authenticity Arouses Tourists' Emotional Attachment and Revisit Intention – An Empirical Study of World Heritage Sites in Vietnam

Abstract

This paper examines the complex interaction between heritage authenticity and tourists' revisit intention, with a particular emphasis on the mediating role of emotional attachment and the application of place attachment theory. Unlike prior research predominantly conducted in Western contexts, this study investigates five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Central Vietnam. Utilizing structural equation modeling on data from 319 respondents, the findings challenge conventional assumptions by demonstrating that authenticity alone does not directly drive revisit intention. Instead, emotional attachment emerges as a crucial mediator, reinforcing the significance of experiential and affective dimensions in heritage tourism. Moreover, existential authenticity exerts a stronger influence on emotional attachment than object-based authenticity does, emphasizing the need for immersive and meaningful visitor experiences. These insights provide valuable theoretical and managerial implications, advocating for a shift from passive heritage preservation to emotionally engaging tourism strategies that foster deeper connections and sustainable destination loyalty in non-Western settings.

Keywords: heritage authenticity, emotional attachment, place attachment theory, revisit intention, UNESCO World Heritage sites

1. Introduction

Vietnam possesses immense potential for heritage tourism, given its rich repository of historical and cultural assets, including numerous UNESCO-recognised, special national, and national heritage sites. From ancient temples and imperial cities to centuries-old traditions and folklore, the country offers a deep and diverse cultural landscape that appeals to both domestic and international travelers. Central Vietnam stands out as a prime destination with an exceptional concentration of cultural and natural heritage. This region is home to five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including four cultural heritage sites of the Ho Dynasty Citadel, Imperial City of Hue, Hoi An Ancient Town and My Son Sanctuary and one natural heritage site of Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). These destinations collectively showcase Vietnam's architectural ingenuity, historical depth, and ecological significance, making them invaluable assets for cultural tourism. Despite its strategic location, well-preserved heritage, and significant tourism potential, the region remains underutilized, facing challenges such as inconsistent visitor retention, fluctuating tourist arrivals, and limited economic benefits for local communities.

In heritage tourism, one of the key factors influencing visitor engagement and loyalty is the perception of authenticity at heritage sites. While previous research has recognised the role of heritage authenticity in shaping visitors' experiences and has considered it a crucial factor in decision-making processes in heritage tourism (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Taylor & Shankar, 2008; Zhang et al., 2019). Its direct effect on tourist

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behavior, especially revisit intention, remains limited. Existing studies often assume a straightforward link between authenticity and tourists' loyalty (Fu, 2019; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), neglecting the psychological and emotional processes that mediate this relationship.

Since encouraging repeat visits is crucial for the long-term sustainability and success of heritage tourism destinations (Ali et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2022) understanding the underlying mechanisms that influence tourists' decisions to revisit is essential. Therefore, this research paper aims to answer the following questions: (1) Does heritage authenticity directly influence revisit intention, or is its effect mediated by emotional engagement? (2) If mediated, which aspect of authenticity—object-based or existential—has a stronger impact on emotional attachment and ultimately on revisit intention? These questions have yet to be thoroughly explored, highlighting the need for a more detailed investigation into the emotional and behavioural dynamics of heritage tourism.

To bridge these gaps, this study introduces emotional attachment as a mediator in the relationship between tourists' perceptions of heritage authenticity and revisit intention. Drawing on Place Attachment Theory, it argues that authenticity alone does not guarantee tourist loyalty; rather, it fosters emotional bonds that, in turn, drive revisit intention. Furthermore, this study distinguishes between object-based authenticity (rooted in tangible historical elements) and existential authenticity (arising from personal, immersive experiences) to determine which exerts a greater influence on emotional attachment.

Unlike previous studies on authenticity that focus on a single heritage site (e.g., Cong et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021), this research adopts a multi-site empirical approach across five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Central Vietnam with an Eastern cultural context. By employing PLS-SEM analysis on data set from 319 respondents, this research provides a holistic understanding of the interaction between heritage authenticity, emotional bonds, and tourists' willingness to travel back to a destination through the lens of Place Attachment theory.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place attachment theory

Place Attachment Theory explains the emotional, cognitive, and functional bonds that each person establishes with specific locations they visit, influencing their feelings of inclusion and belonging to a place (Ram et al., 2016). This theory, rooted in environmental psychology, has been extensively utilised in tourism studies to explore how tourists develop affective ties to destinations, particularly heritage sites. In the findings of Manyiwa et al. (2018), place attachment is constituted of two main components: place identity, representing the symbolic and emotional bond individuals have with a site, and place dependence, which pertains to the operational significance of the site in fulfilling specific needs. However, according to the study Scannell and Gifford (2010), place attachment is structured into a three-dimensional framework: person, reflecting individual or collective meanings; process, encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral components; and place, highlighting spatial scale, specificity, and social or physical elements.

Accordingly, emotional attachment is a subcomponent of place identity from the perspective of Manyiwa et al. (2018) and a part of the process domain within the framework of Scannell and Gifford (2010). It is a particularly relevant factor in heritage tourism, as visitors often develop sentimental connections to culturally significant sites, reinforcing their revisit intentions and loyalty (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Understanding place attachment is crucial for destination managers aiming to enhance visitor experiences and encourage sustainable tourism development.

Rooted in the Place Attachment theory, this paper explores how emotional attachment affects the relationship between heritage authenticity and tourists' future visitation intentions. Specifically, it investigates how various

aspects of authenticity (including object-based and existential) contribute to tourists' emotional connections with heritage sites, ultimately influencing their desire to return.

2.2. Authenticity

In the heritage tourism context, authenticity, or at least its perception, is a significant characteristic of a location (Chhabra et al., 2003; Nam et al., 2023) as it functions as a measure of a heritage site's quality and serves as an essential functional aspect in value perceptions of destinations (Lee et al., 2016; Weng et al., 2019). The conceptualisation of authenticity in heritage tourism has changed significantly over time. Early theories of authenticity in the field of tourism studies were objective in nature, contending that an authentic, pure, and original rendition could be determined by strict, object-based standards. However, this point of view is excessively rigid for the majority of common travellers (Lu et al., 2022).

Later, Wang shed light on authenticity by exploring existential authenticity, which is activated by tourists' activities. This is because the perception of authenticity is more subjective and precisely relates to each visitor's unique memories, engagement, and ethnic identity than it is in heritage conservation (Dai et al., 2021). He makes a clear distinction between object-based authenticity (OBA) and existential authenticity (EA). Of which, the latter (also called activity-based authenticity) has two sub-categories: intra-personal (body sentiments) and interpersonal (self-making) (Wang, 1999).

Further studies have expanded on this conceptualization by examining how tourists' authenticity perception affects their behaviours. Kolar and Zabkar (2010) found that authenticity perceived by tourists contributed to enhancing their emotional involvement and influenced their loyalty to heritage sites. This aligns with the view that authenticity should be seen as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than as an inherent property of heritage sites (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Given these developments, this study focuses on the relationship between object-based authenticity (OBA) and existential authenticity (EA) with tourists' emotional attachment (EA) and revisit intention (RI). By integrating these perspectives, this paper contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how different dimensions of authenticity influence tourists' emotional and behavioural responses in heritage tourism settings.

2.3. Revisit intention (RI)

Tourists' revisit intention serves as an essential behavioral indicator of consumer loyalty in tourism (Sugandini et al., 2019), signifies the likelihood of returning to destinations. It is a key measure of a destination's long-term success and sustainability (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Singh & Singh, 2019). It is further described as an individual's deliberate intention to revisit, influenced by previous experiences and destination attributes. From a marketing perspective, understanding the main factors influencing tourists' willingness to return to a destination can help managers develop heritage destinations effectively and sustainably. It is argued that a high percentage of repeat visitors provides destinations with a competitive advantage by reducing customer acquisition costs and fostering long-term sustainability. Additionally, it is highlighted that visitors expressing a strong desire to revisit are also likely to recommend the site to others, strengthening its reputation through positive word-of-mouth. Moreover, repeat tourists demonstrate greater loyalty, stay longer, and contribute more to local economies than first-time visitors (Abdullah & Lui, 2018). Therefore, revisit intention plays a vital role in tourism research, as it directly affects both the sustainability and profitability of destinations. Recognizing the factors motivating tourists to return allows marketers and managers to develop strategies that enhance visitor loyalty (Radhika et al., 2025). This emphasises the importance of destination managers creating engaging and memorable experiences that foster emotional connections and promote long-term visitor retention.

Several prior studies focus on this link in the context of service industries (J. H. Kim, 2021; K. Kim & Baker, 2017; Xu et al., 2023) and ecotourism (Yang et al., 2023). In heritage tourism, there has been limited research on the interplay between authenticity and tourists' behavioral intentions of revisiting a destination

(Zhou et al., 2022). In their research, Zhou et al. (2022) proved that authenticity affects revisit intention and memorial tourism experience and place attachment work as the mediators in this relationship. They concluded that tourists were more likely to return to heritage sites if they recognised these destinations as authentic, either in terms of object-based or existential authenticity. In the exploration of Park et al. (2020) the interaction between authenticity and revisit intention is also investigated. The outcomes highlighted that nostalgia and authenticity are essential variables for post-visit behavioral intentions. As highlighted in the study Maarif et al. (2023), both authenticity and social media serve a function of enhancing tourists' intent to revisit a heritage site.

Although a few empirical studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between authenticity and tourists' revisit intentions, none have integrated authenticity, tourists' emotional attachment, and their intention to return to the destination within the heritage tourism context. Using five World Heritage Sites in the mid-region of Vietnam as case studies, this is the first attempt to explore the interaction among these four variables across multiple sites.

2.4. Emotional attachment (EA)

Emotional attachment is deeply rooted in psychological, sociocultural, and cognitive processes that shape human connections to people, places, objects, and brands (Hernández et al., 2007). It is a multidimensional construct (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Schultz et al., 1989), influenced by both innate psychological mechanisms and external environmental stimuli. It explains how emotional bonds develop, sustain, and influence behaviors (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) across different contexts, such as heritage tourism, consumer behavior, and interpersonal relationships.

Emotional attachment plays a pivotal role in heritage tourism, influencing visitor loyalty, revisit intention, and conservation efforts. Rooted in Place Attachment Theory, emotional bonds with heritage sites are often shaped by perceived authenticity, cultural identity (Yi et al., 2023), and memorable experiences (Zhou et al., 2022). Tourists who regard a site as authentic and historically significant are more inclined to develop strong emotional ties, which, in turn, enhance their loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Additionally, visitors who feel a personal or ancestral connection to a site, such as heritage travellers seeking their roots, exhibit stronger emotional attachment, as observed in studies on diaspora and ancestral tourism (Poria et al., 2003)

A key factor affecting emotional attachment is perceived authenticity. Heritage tourists are often attracted to sites that maintain their historical integrity through object-based authenticity (original artefacts and structures) and existential authenticity (immersive experiences) (Wang, 1999). Research has indicated that heritage sites providing guided storytelling, interactive exhibits, and historical re-enactments can boost emotional engagement, resulting in stronger attachments (Schou & Løvlie, 2021). Furthermore, emotional arousal, produced through multisensory interactions, cultural festivals, and personal storytelling, notably enhances tourists' attachment to a site (Ram et al., 2016). Additionally, satisfaction with service quality and personal involvement contribute to forming deeper emotional bonds (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

3. Hypothesis development

For the empirical analysis, the research hypotheses were formulated using insights from the literature on authenticity, emotional attachment, and revisit intention.

3.1. Heritage authenticity and revisit intention

Prior literature has illustrated that authenticity is associated with revisit intention. Maarif et al. (2023) reported that authenticity can increase tourists' revisit intention to a certain extent. In addition, visitors' perceived authenticity of a site affects their repeat visits to that site Poria et al. (2003). Furthermore, Kolar and Zabkar

(2010) and Zhou et al. (2022) also concluded that object-based and existential authenticity affect RI. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: OBA has a positive direct impact on tourists' RI

H2: EAU has a positive direct impact on tourists' RI

3.2. Heritage authenticity and tourists' emotional attachment

Existing research claims that tourists' perception of authenticity can be an antecedent to place attachment (Qiu & Zhang, 2021). Specifically, Zhang et al. (2022) confirm that "authentic experience is an important antecedent of emotion". Another study of Wu et al. (2019) suggests that authenticity has a considerable influence on place attachment and satisfaction. As emotional attachment is one dimension of place attachment, it is hypothesized as follows:

H3: OBA has a positive impact on tourists' EA

H4: EAU has a positive direct impact on tourists' EA

3.3. Tourists' emotional attachment and revisit intention

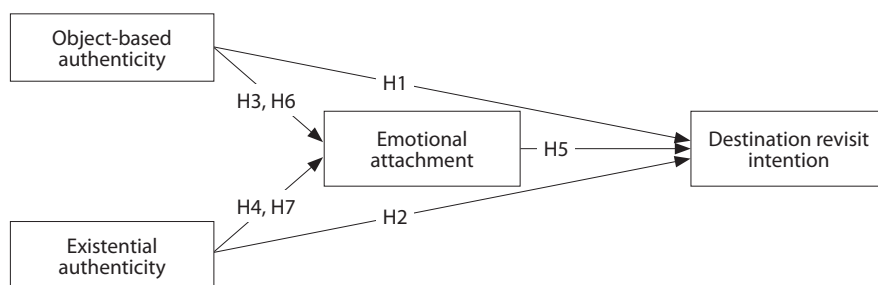
Two dimensions of place attachment positively affect tourists' revisiting intentions (Isa et al., 2020). In addition, George and George (2004) considered emotional experience as one of the significant antecedents of revisit intention. Thus, we propose the hypothesis as follows:

H5: Tourists' EA has a positive impact on RI

H6: Tourists' EA mediates the relationship of OBA and RI

H7: Tourists' EA mediates the relationship of EAU and RI

Figure 1
The proposed research model



4. Methodology

4.1. Research area

The mid-region of Vietnam is a culturally and historically rich area that boasts a remarkable concentration of heritage sites recognised by UNESCO. This region is home to a total of five World Heritage Sites, comprising one natural site and four cultural sites. The cultural heritage sites include the Ho Dynasty Citadel in Thanh Hoa Province, Imperial City of Hue in Thua Thien Hue Province, Hoi An Ancient Town, and My Son Sanctuary in Quang Nam Province (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d). These sites reflect Vietnam's long-standing history, architectural achievements, and diverse cultural influences, from the imperial legacy of the Nguyen Dynasty to the ancient Champa civilisation. Alongside these cultural sites, the region also

features a UNESCO natural heritage site of Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park, located in Quang Binh Province (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). This national park is internationally renowned for its extensive cave systems, karst formations, and rich biodiversity, making it a significant destination for both heritage and eco-tourism.

4.2. Data collection and sampling

The research employed a cross-sectional questionnaire-based method to test the given hypotheses. To boost the validity and reliability of the evidence from the testimonial survey, a pretest of the questionnaire will be carried out through Google Form with a group of respondents ($n = 10$) from individuals who have visited the related heritage sites in our study at least once. The objective of the pretest is to enhance the language, grammar, and wording of difficult-to-understand statements. Then, the questionnaire was finalised before sending it to participants.

The study employed purposive random sampling and established specific criteria for selecting respondents, including:

- (1) Having previously travelled to the destination at least once.
- (2) Being no younger than 20 years old.
- (3) Could be both domestic and international tourists.

Data was collected through (1) Google Forms and (2) on-site surveys at My Son Sanctuary in Quang Nam Province over a period of five months. The mixed method of data collection allows the study to include a wide range of respondents and reduces response bias.

4.3. Measurement scale

This research measured the variables by adopting and modifying established scales from previous relevant literature. In particular, the authors employed 7 items measuring both object-based authenticity and existential authenticity, developed by Lu et al. (2022). From the study of Zhou et al. (2022) and Zhang et al. (2018), this study adapted 3 items of emotional attachment and expanded them into 4 items, and used 4 items to measure revisit intention. All constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

5. Results

5.1. Demographic profile

In this study, most respondents are female, accounting for 61.4%, while men make up 38.6%. Regarding nationality, the vast majority (98.1%) are Vietnamese, with a small proportion from Europe (0.9%) and America or Canada (0.9%). Statistical analysis indicates that the 31-40 age group forms the largest share of respondents (38.2%), closely followed by those aged 20-30 (34.8%). Participants aged 41-50 represent 16%, while the 51-60 age group makes up 7.5%, and only 3.4% of respondents are over 60 years old. Concerning educational background, most participants hold a bachelor's degree (60.5%), with a significant portion (24.5%) having postgraduate qualifications. A smaller percentage (9.7%) have only completed high school education, while 4.1% have attained an associate college degree, and 1.3% falls into the "Other" category.

5.2. Measurement model

Regarding the descriptive statistics shown in Table 1, the distribution of mean scores for all item clusters is around 4.0, indicating that respondents generally agree with the statements. The highest mean score is 4.113

for RI2, while the lowest is 3.887 for RI3. Standard deviation values are relatively low, reflecting response consistency, with the greatest variation seen in EAu3 (1.034).

Table 1
Reliability and validity of the indicators and constructs

	Outer loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Mean value	St. Dev
Existential authenticity		0.910	0.937	0.788		
EAu1	0.918				4.013	0.960
EAu2	0.914				4.075	0.986
EAu3	0.794				4.009	1.034
EAu4	0.920				4.097	0.976
Object-based authenticity		0.911	0.944	0.848		
OBA1	0.931				4.107	1.036
OBA2	0.915				4.031	0.992
OBA3	0.917				4.107	0.917
Emotional attachment		0.950	0.964	0.870		
EA1	0.942				4.041	0.907
EA2	0.926				4.094	0.859
EA3	0.919				3.987	0.913
EA4	0.945				4.085	0.897
Destination revisit intention		0.921	0.944	0.808		
RI1	0.903				4.047	0.882
RI2	0.931				4.113	0.834
RI3	0.905				3.887	0.920
RI4	0.855				3.897	0.982

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

An assessment of convergent validity and reliability was conducted for each indicator. To assess internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) were employed, whereas Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was utilised to examine convergent validity, with additional support from outer loadings. A minimum threshold of 0.70 was required for CR, Cronbach's Alpha and outer loading; and at least 0.50 for AVE (Hair et al., 2019).

As described in Table 1, the values of Cronbach's Alpha (α) range from 0.921 (RI) to 0.950 (EA), indicating excellent internal consistency, as values above 0.90 suggest strong reliability. Similarly, Composite Reliability (CR) values exceed 0.90 for all constructs, with the highest being 0.964 for EA. This further supports the robustness of the constructs. All computed Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpass the recommended 0.50 threshold, with the highest being 0.808 for RI and the lowest at 0.788 for EAu. In addition, all outer loadings exceed 0.70, ensuring indicator reliability, with the lowest being 0.794 (EAu3) and the highest at 0.945 (EA4). These results confirm convergent validity, meaning the constructs adequately explain their respective indicators.

Table 2
Fornell-Larcker criterion

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Destination Revisit Intention (RI)	0.899			
2. Existential Authenticity (Eau)	0.756	0.888		
3. Object-Based Authenticity (OBA)	0.747	0.892	0.921	
4. Visitors' Emotional Attachment (EA)	0.873	0.806	0.789	0.933

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings, as described in Tables 2 and 3, were used to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs, confirming discriminant validity. Specifically, RI (0.899) has a higher AVE than its correlations with EAU (0.756), OBA (0.747), and EA (0.873). Similarly, OBA (0.921) and EA (0.933) also show higher diagonal values compared to their correlations with other constructs, indicating clear separation among them. However, EAU and OBA exhibit a high correlation (0.888 and 0.892).

To check this case, the authors continue to test cross-loadings to ensure that they are empirically distinguishable.

Table 3
Cross loadings

Indicators	RI	EAU	OBA	EA
EAU1	0.725	0.918	0.818	0.746
EAU2	0.692	0.914	0.806	0.734
EAU3	0.557	0.794	0.681	0.601
EAU4	0.698	0.920	0.851	0.768
OBA1	0.646	0.838	0.931	0.712
OBA2	0.694	0.775	0.915	0.711
OBA3	0.722	0.849	0.917	0.754
EA1	0.819	0.763	0.770	0.942
EA2	0.822	0.733	0.741	0.926
EA3	0.797	0.743	0.715	0.919
EA4	0.822	0.767	0.716	0.945
RI1	0.903	0.724	0.719	0.826
RI2	0.931	0.692	0.695	0.805
RI3	0.905	0.650	0.617	0.781
RI4	0.855	0.649	0.651	0.724

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Further validation using cross-loadings reinforces these findings by ensuring that each indicator demonstrates a higher loading on its intended construct than on any other construct. Specifically, RI indicators (0.903-0.855) show higher loadings on their respective construct compared to their cross-loadings on OBA (0.719 – 0.651), EAU (0.724 – 0.649), and EA (0.826 – 0.724). Likewise, OBA indicators (0.931 – 0.917), EAU indicators (0.918 – 0.920) and EA indicators (0.942 – 0.945) display higher loadings on their own construct than on any other constructs.

Although EAU and OBA exhibit a high correlation (0.892) in the Fornell-Larcker criterion check, their respective indicators still load strongest on their own construct, confirming that they remain conceptually distinct factors.

5.3. Hypothesis testing

Table 4
The structural model's results

	Hypothesis	Path coefficient	t-value	p-value	Meaning
H1	OBA→EA	0.344	3.49	0.000	Significant
H2	EAU →EA	0.499	5.22	0.000	Significant
H3	OBA → RI	0.104	1.08	0.282	Not Significant
H4	EAU→ RI	0.074	0.69	0.490	Not Significant
H5	EA → RI	0.732	12.32	0.000	Significant
H6	OBA → EA → RI	0.252	3.594	0.000	Significant
H7	EAU → EA → RI	0.365	4.412	0.000	Significant

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The study used a bootstrapping method with 2,000 resamples to test the hypothesis. As presented in Table 4, both OBA ($\beta = 0.344$, $t = 3.49$, $p = 0.000$) and EAu ($\beta = 0.499$, $t = 5.22$, $p = 0.000$) have a significant positive effect on EA. This indicates that when tourists perceive a destination as authentic, either through tangible objects or through immersive personal experiences, they cultivate stronger affective bonds with the place. Notably, EAu has a stronger effect on EA compared to OBA. Thus, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were confirmed.

However, neither OBA ($\beta = 0.104$, $t = 1.08$, $p = 0.282$) nor EAu ($\beta = 0.074$, $t = 0.69$, $p = 0.490$) have a significant direct influence on RI. This suggests that while authenticity enhances the tourism experience, it does not directly lead to tourists' intention to return. Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were rejected.

Instead, EA emerges as the strongest predictor of RI ($\beta = 0.732$, $t = 12.32$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that tourists who feel emotionally connected to a destination tend to exhibit a higher propensity for revisiting. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.

The indirect effect analysis further confirms that authenticity influences RI only through EA. Specifically, the indirect effect of OBA (0.252) is more than twice its direct effect (0.104). Similarly, the indirect effect of EAu (0.365) is nearly five times its direct effect (0.074). This confirms that authenticity alone does not directly drive RI but rather influences tourists through the EA they develop toward the destination. Without this emotional connection, the impact of authenticity on loyalty remains minimal. Thus, Hypothesis 6 and Hypothesis 7 were confirmed, respectively.

Table 5
R2 and Q2 Coefficient of determination

	R ²	Q ²
Destination revisit intention	0.773	0.615
Visitors' emotional attachment	0.673	0.576

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Ranging from 0 to 1, R² values indicate the extent of explanatory power, with higher values representing stronger predictive ability (Hair et al., 2019). Table 5 reports an R² value of 0.773 for RI, suggesting that predictor variables explain 77.3% of its variance. Likewise, the R² value for EA is 0.673, indicating that 67.3% of its variance is accounted for by its predictors. The high R² values suggest that the model is robust and effectively captures the key factors influencing tourists' behavioural intentions.

Additionally, Hair et al. (2019) states that Q² values above zero indicate that the structural model demonstrates predictive relevance. Specifically, a Q² value above 0 signifies limited predictive relevance, while values exceeding 0.25 and 0.50 indicate medium and large predictive relevance, respectively. In this study, the Q² values from the blindfolding test (0.615 for RI and 0.576 for EA) suggest that the model has strong predictive relevance, meaning it can reliably forecast future tourist behavioural intentions based on these constructs.

6. Discussion

Demographic factors contribute significantly to shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors (Sahoo & Mohanty, 2022). The study's demographic profile indicates a predominance of female respondents (61.4%) and mostly Vietnamese (98.1%), with a high proportion of respondents aged from 20 to 40 years and holding advanced educational qualifications (60.5% holding a bachelor's degree and 24.5% having postgraduate qualifications). These demographic characteristics may have influenced the findings, as younger and well-educated tourists might be more inclined towards experiential and emotional engagement with heritage sites compared to older tourists, who may prioritize historical accuracy and traditional authenticity. Additionally,

cultural background influences how authenticity is perceived (Tian et al., 2020); Vietnamese tourists might have stronger emotional ties to domestic heritage sites due to cultural familiarity, whereas international tourists could assess authenticity through a more historical or objective lens.

In addition, this study investigates the links among heritage authenticity, emotional attachment, and revisit intention in the context of five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Central Vietnam. Prior research has emphasized authenticity as a pivotal aspect of tourist experience in heritage tourism (Gursoy et al., 2022). However, its direct influence on tourists' likelihood of revisiting the destination remains inconclusive. While some studies (e.g., Maarif et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2022) emphasized that authenticity positively impacts revisit intention, the outcomes of this study challenge previous assumptions by revealing that authenticity alone neither object-based nor existential directly influences tourists' intention to return.

Instead, the model further reveals that emotional attachment fully mediates the interaction between authenticity and revisit intention. The outcomes resonate with emerging research emphasizing the role of emotions in shaping tourist experiences and decision-making (Adeel et al., 2025; Prayag et al., 2017; Tsai, 2016). It also supports the Place Attachment theory, which posits that emotional and psychological connections to places strongly influence visitor behavior (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). In this context, tourists' emotional attachment to heritage sites fosters revisit intention, supporting the argument that heritage tourism success depends not only on the preservation of authentic elements but also on the ability of destinations to create meaningful, emotionally engaging experiences. The study expands this theoretical perspective by showing that authenticity contributes to emotional attachment, which in turn drives loyalty. This result reinforces the role of affective engagement in heritage tourism decision-making (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

On the other hand, this study provides empirical evidence that two dimensions of authenticity, including object-based and existential, are foundational components in fostering emotional attachment with heritage sites, reinforcing recent research that advocates for the integration of affective and sensory experiences into authenticity frameworks (H. Kim & Jamal, 2007). Specifically, existential authenticity exerts a stronger influence on emotional attachment than object-based authenticity, highlighting the significance of immersive and meaningful visitor experiences.

Furthermore, by situating this research within a non-Western heritage tourism context, the findings offer new insights from a Southeast Asian context into how cultural differences shape authenticity perceptions and their effects. While Western tourists may assess authenticity through historical accuracy (Waitt, 2000; Wiles & Vander Stoep, 2008), Vietnamese visitors might prioritise emotional and cultural connections. This distinction suggests that the role of authenticity in tourism loyalty may vary based on cultural perspectives, reinforcing the need for localised approaches in destination management (Tian et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

7. Conclusion

7.1. Theoretical implications

This study enhances the existing body of literature on heritage tourism by challenging the conventional assumption that authenticity directly influences revisit intention. Instead, it highlights emotional attachment as a critical mediator, reinforcing Place Attachment Theory, which posits that affective bonds with destinations are stronger predictors of tourist loyalty than cognitive evaluations alone (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). By distinguishing between object-based authenticity and existential authenticity, this research provides empirical evidence that experiential and emotional engagement with a heritage site plays a more significant role in fostering visitor attachment and loyalty than historical accuracy alone. This aligns with postmodern authenticity theories, which argue that tourists increasingly seek personal

meaning and emotional resonance in their experiences rather than purely objective authenticity (Wang, 1999). In addition, this study also contributes to the growing literature on heritage tourism behavioural outcomes, demonstrating that place attachment directly influences tourist behaviours, particularly revisit intention (Zhou et al., 2022).

These findings also further extend Place Attachment Theory in sustainable tourism development, as repeat visitors play a central role in ensuring economic stability, cultural preservation, and environmental responsibility (Dwyer et al., 2019). While first-time tourists may generate initial interest in a destination, it is returning visitors who provide long-term financial sustainability by reducing reliance on costly marketing efforts and consistently spending on local businesses, accommodations, and cultural activities (Abdullah & Lui, 2018). Moreover, repeat visitors who have a strong emotional attachment to the sites tend to engage more deeply with a destination's heritage and traditions, strengthening cultural sustainability by advocating for preservation efforts and resisting over-commercialisation. Environmentally, with emotional bonds with the sites, they also adopt more responsible travel behaviors (Buonincontri et al., 2017), such as following conservation guidelines, avoiding peak seasons, and minimizing their ecological footprint.

Beyond their direct impact on sustainability, repeated visitors also play a crucial role in destination marketing. Tourists who develop a strong emotional connection to a site are more likely to recommend it to others through word-of-mouth (Abbasi et al., 2021) and online reviews. Since personal recommendations are often more persuasive than traditional advertising, this organic form of promotion helps attract new visitors who are already favourably disposed towards the destination. This creates a self-sustaining tourism model, where emotionally engaged visitors not only return but also bring in like-minded travellers, further strengthening economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability.

Additionally, by employing a multi-site empirical approach across five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Central Vietnam, this study provides a novel framework for understanding the emotional and behavioral dynamics of heritage tourism in Southeast Asia by revealing that Vietnamese tourists prioritize emotional and cultural connections over rigid historical authenticity, supporting the argument that the perception of authenticity is culturally relative and should be examined through diverse cultural lenses (Tian et al., 2020). This opens avenues for future research to explore additional mediating and moderating variables, such as nostalgia, satisfaction, and social identity, in the authenticity-loyalty relationship, further enriching our understanding of place attachment in sustainable tourism contexts.

7.2. Managerial implications

The paper's findings highlight the vital role of emotional attachment in shaping tourists' intention to revisit heritage destinations. While preserving historical integrity remains essential, enabling visitors to engage with heritage in meaningful ways encourages long-term loyalty and advocacy (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Chen & Chen, 2010). Instead, heritage tourism strategies should focus on enhancing existential authenticity, which has a stronger impact on emotional attachment and revisit intention. By creating immersive and personally significant experiences, destinations can foster a deeper connection with visitors, increasing the likelihood of their return.

From a managerial perspective, heritage tourism managers should move beyond traditional preservation efforts and adopt experience-driven strategies that enhance existential authenticity. Since emotional attachment is a stronger driver of revisit intention than authenticity alone, destinations should prioritize initiatives such as guided storytelling tours, historical reenactments, hands-on craft workshops, or culinary experiences that provide tourists with a sense of personal involvement in local traditions (Tilden, 1977). Additionally, digital enhancements, such as augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) experiences, can further enrich visitor interactions, making historical narratives more engaging and emotionally resonant (Choi & Nam, 2024; Guo et al., 2024).

7.3. Limitations and future research

The authors employed a cross-sectional survey in this study, capturing tourist perceptions at a particular moment of time, limiting the assessment of changes in emotional attachment and revisit intention over time. Additionally, the predominance of Vietnamese respondents restricts the generalizability of the findings to international tourists, whose perceptions may vary across cultural contexts. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach and a more varied sample to enhance validity and applicability. In addition, emotional attachment serves as the sole mediator in the connection between tourists' authenticity perception and their revisit intention in this study. Future research could extend this framework by investigating additional mediators or moderators, such as visitor satisfaction, perceived value, nostalgia, or cultural identity, to further elucidate the underlying mechanisms influencing this relationship.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

The heritage authenticity and tourist loyalty

We are a research team from the International University - Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. We are currently conducting research on the impact of the authenticity of heritage on tourists' intention to revisit certain tourist attractions in Central Vietnam. The data collected is for academic research purposes and will be kept completely confidential. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements, where:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| (1) Strongly disagree | (4) Agree |
| (2) Disagree | (5) Strongly agree |
| (3) Neutral | |

Your feelings about the destination will greatly contribute to the value of this survey.
Thank you!

I have visited

- Hoi An Ancient Town / My Son Sanctuary / Hue Imperial City / Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park
..... None of them.

If you have visited at least one of the above destinations, please answer the following questions based on your feelings about your most recent visit.

I. AUTHENTICITY

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Through experiencing this site, I could feel the sense of the past and traditional local culture					
The site seems to be actually set in the past					
I liked the way this site blends with the attractive landscape					
I liked special activities connected to this site					
I enjoyed the unique cultural and spiritual experience here					
I liked the calm and peaceful atmosphere during the visit					
I felt connected with local history and residents					

IV. EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
This site is very special to me					
This site brings many good experience to me					
I feel the sense of belonging to this site					
I feel connected to this site					

VIII. TOURISTS' LOYALTY

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I am interested in visiting this site again					
I may come to this site again in the future					
I will travel to this site more frequently					
This site is my first destination choice when I wish to experience heritage tourism destination					

Part B PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Gender: Male Female Other
2. What is your nationality? Vietnam Europe Australia/ New Zealand Africa
 Latin America America/ Canada Other countries in Asia
3. Age < 20 20 - 30 31 - 40
 41 - 50 51 - 60 > 60
4. Educational level High school College Bachelor
 Post graduate Others

Thank you for completing this survey!