Article

Empirical Analysis on Influence of Authenticity Perception on Tourist Loyalty in Historical Blocks in China

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Abstract: Tourist loyalty is the key to the sustainable development of tourism in urban historical blocks. This article focuses on exploring the relationship between authenticity perception and tourist loyalty in this context. With this aim, we introduce the mediating variable of tourist engagement and construct a theoretical model of authenticity perception, tourist engagement, and tourist loyalty. Hierarchical regression analysis and bootstrapping were performed on questionnaire data of 287 West Street tourists in Dujiangyan, China. The results of this study demonstrate that both object-related authenticity perception and existential authenticity perception have a significant positive impact on tourist loyalty behavior, with similar degrees of influence. Additionally, the study reveals that tourist engagement plays a mediating role in the relationship among object-related authenticity, existential authenticity, and tourist loyalty. From the perspective of tourist engagement, this article reveals the impact mechanism of authenticity perception on tourist loyalty in the context of historical block tourism, enriches the research on tourism authenticity, and deepens the understanding of tourist loyalty behavior. Furthermore, the results of this study also provide reference for the formulation of sustainable development policies related to tourism in historical blocks.

Keywords: tourist engagement; object-related authenticity; existential authenticity; historical blocks

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the principle of sustainability has been integrated into the policy framework of cultural heritage [1]. The attributes of heritage, including the natural, cultural, social, and economic capitals of cities and regions, have gained increasing recognition for their role in shaping local identities, fostering social cohesion, and contributing to economic development [2]. Certain historical blocks are characterized by a significant number and range of historical buildings or cultural relics, showcasing a comprehensive and authentic representation of traditional patterns and historical styles [3]. Historical blocks hold intrinsic values, such as history, culture, aesthetics, art, material heritage, and human sentiments, making them crucial objects for cultural heritage preservation. As urbanization progresses in developing countries, the effective protection and utilization of these traditional architectural attractions have become essential to achieving sustainable development in historical blocks. The Washington Charter (1987) emphasizes the importance of recognizing historical blocks as 'historical witnesses' that reflect the value of traditional city culture [4]. The Nara Authenticity Document, introduced by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), outlines the fundamental characteristics and protection principles of historical districts, including historical authenticity, life authenticity, and style integrity [5]. Beyond providing housing for residents, historical blocks also offer recreational spaces for tourists. MacCannell (1973) argues that tourists are motivated to travel in search of authentic tourist destinations, highlighting the significance of authenticity for the protection and rational development of cultural heritage [6]. In the context of modernity, historical blocks serve not only as physical spaces that hold the historical memory of residents but

also as important destinations for tourists to experience sightseeing. They also function as public spaces where hosts and guests can share and communicate. However, previous studies have primarily focused on the authenticity of historical and cultural sites [7,8], rather than investigating the connection between tourists' perception of authenticity and behavior from their perspective.

In the era of mass tourism, historical blocks have emerged as significant urban tourist attractions [9]. The preservation, renovation, and revitalization of historical blocks align with the current global trend of cutting-edge development in architectural heritage protection and reuse, underscoring their academic value and practical importance. This paper examines the impact of tourists' perception of authenticity in historical and cultural sites on their loyalty as tourists. Additionally, it explores the role of tourist engagement as an intermediary variable between authenticity perception and tourist loyalty. This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of tourist loyalty and provides insights into the analysis of authenticity perception and its relationship with tourist loyalty. Furthermore, the findings of this study can inform management strategies for the preservation of historical and cultural sites and contribute to the sustainable development of urban tourism.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 1 provides an introduction. Section 2 consists of a literature review. Section 3 focuses on the process of deriving the hypothesis. Section 4 introduces the overall research process of this paper. Section 5 presents an empirical analysis of the results. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Authenticity and Perception of Authenticity

The authenticity of tourism has been a topic of discussion, particularly due to the recognition of how modern society can distort experiences. In 1964, Boorstin argued that the tourism industry deliberately constructs experiences that lack true authenticity [10]. Expanding on Goffman's front-end and backstage theory [11], MacCannell (1973) introduced the concept of stage authenticity in tourism research [6]. He observed that tourist destinations are carefully packaged to appeal to visitors, resulting in a modification of the objective authenticity of the culture. Consequently, tourists seek out experiences that they perceive as authentic. Scholars have further categorized stage authenticity into objective authenticity, which focuses on the inherent properties of objects. This can be evaluated by using fixed standards or knowledge, with a specific emphasis on the authenticity of tourism activities and the culture found in tourist destinations. Cohen (1988) expanded on the theory of staged authenticity by introducing constructive authenticity, which centers on symbolic authenticity derived from the beliefs, expectations, and preferences of travelers in relation to the actual experiences they encounter [12]. Wang (1999) introduced the concept of existential authenticity, suggesting that the inherent authenticity of a tourist destination is not as significant as the personal journey of self-discovery and the pursuit of genuine experiences [13]. According to Wang, tourism authenticity can be categorized into object-related authenticity (OA) and existential authenticity (EA), with the former encompassing objective and constructive authenticity. In the objective view, the nature or 'originality' of tourism attractions is considered a measure of their authenticity. This perspective views authenticity as an inherent, unchanging quality unaffected by personal or social influences [14]. Conversely, the constructive authenticity view offers a different outlook, arguing that authenticity is not fixed but continuously shaped by individuals and society through their interactions. Tourists assess the authenticity of attractions based on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds, making it a highly subjective concept that evolves with time and context [15]. As societies progress and perceptions shift, attractions once overlooked may eventually be acknowledged as authentic. On the other hand, the existential approach emphasizes the tourist's experience. Here, authenticity is tied to the personal feelings and experiences of the tourist rather than the nature of the attraction itself. Existential authenticity may manifest as a unique state of being that emerges during travel, independent of external attractions. In essence, existential authen-

ticity focuses on how tourism activities impact self-perception rather than the authenticity of tourist attractions [16]. As a result, the concept of tourism authenticity has evolved into a philosophical question, leading subsequent scholars to propose postmodernist authenticity [17]. However, this perspective has not gained universal acceptance due to its challenge to the traditional notion of authenticity.

The issue of tourism authenticity has been a prominent concern among scholars. A literature search reveals that scholars primarily focus on defining the meaning of authenticity [17] and exploring tourists' motivations [18,19]. Steiner and Reisinger (2006) emphasize the crucial role of authenticity in shaping tourist behavior at destinations [18]. Kolar and Zabkar (2009) argue that tourists seek authenticity in response to the pervasive 'artificial' and 'unnatural' aspects of daily life [19]. Kirillova and Lehto (2015) proposed that tourism is believed to promote existential authenticity because the destination represents a limited area in which conventional social order and norms are temporarily set aside, making the environment conducive to liberation and the expression of the authentic self [20].

Tourism perception refers to the cognitive process through which individuals obtain information about tourism objects and environmental conditions using their senses [21]. It involves tourists transforming external tourism information into their internal thoughts. In this paper, authenticity perception is defined as tourists' perception of the authenticity of historical blocks by using various sensory organs. It relates to the degree of matching between the presented 'authenticity' of the tourist destination and the tourists' perception of its original state. It is also influenced by the tourists' participation process.

Existing research has several shortcomings, one of which is the inadequate focus on historical block research. This aspect is crucial in the field of heritage tourism research. Unlike other cultural heritage sites, historical blocks have the unique characteristic of relying on the material infrastructure of the city to express their historical and cultural values. Therefore, the authenticity of these blocks plays a vital role in determining their value. Without authenticity, the significance of historical blocks diminishes significantly.

2.2. Tourist Loyalty

The study of consumer behavior in marketing has led to the gradual development of tourist loyalty (TL), which has become a focal point for experts and scholars since the late 1990s [22]. Loyalty can be defined as a deep-seated commitment to continue purchasing or choosing a product or service in the future, even in the face of changes in consumption scenarios or marketing campaigns [23,24]. Research has identified four stages in the formation process of loyalty: the cognitive stage, the emotional stage, the intention stage, and the action stage [25].

Relevant research on loyalty measurement began earlier, focusing on the development history of loyalty. Initially, loyalty was primarily assessed based on consumers' behavioral dimensions, such as their periodic consumption frequency, repurchase rate, and repurchase cycle. These measures provided insights into consumers' individual-level buyback and recommendation behaviors and were commonly used by scholars [26]. However, scholars gradually encountered difficulties in measuring actual behaviors during investigation and research. As a result, they started using behavioral willingness as an explanatory factor for loyalty. Behavioral willingness refers to consumers' psychological inclination to engage in specific behaviors in the future. When applied to loyalty, it can be categorized into four types: maintaining loyalty, being willing to pay higher prices, spending more on the product, and recommending it to others [27,28].

In research on factors influencing TL, it is widely recognized that the image of tourist places and local attachment play a significant role [24,29]. However, there are different opinions among scholars regarding the influence of object-related authenticity perception and existential authenticity perception on tourist loyalty. Xu and Wang (2011) found that object-related authenticity indirectly affects tourist loyalty based on their study of ancient villages [30]. On the other hand, they observed that the existential perception of authenticity

has a direct positive impact on loyalty behavior. This is because existential tourists seek a more natural and self-absorbed personal experience, aiming to fulfil personal values or goals by 'visiting ancient times'. Consequently, when their tour objectives are not met, they tend to return to the same place. In contrast, Zhou et al. (2013) discovered that object-related authenticity perception has a positive influence on tourist loyalty behavior, while existential authenticity perception does not have a direct positive impact [31]. When it comes to traditional cultural elements like calligraphy landscapes, Chinese tourists tend to focus more on the superficial aspects and objective content of these traditions, rather than placing emphasis on psychological authenticity and deep emotional connections. This suggests that further research is needed to explore how the perception of authenticity impacts tourist loyalty.

Tourism authenticity and tourist loyalty have been extensively studied, yielding numerous findings. However, a thorough examination of the literature reveals certain limitations in existing research. Firstly, most studies on tourist authenticity concentrate on safeguarding the authenticity of cultural heritage within the context of tourism development, primarily from the perspective of tourism objects. This overlooks the significance of tourists' perception of authenticity. Secondly, the impact of tourists' authenticity perception on their loyalty, as well as the extent and mechanism of this influence, remain inconclusive in academic discussions, necessitating further investigation.

3. Research Hypotheses

3.1. Authenticity Perception and Tourist Loyalty

With the rise of the cultural heritage tourism market, scholars have increasingly focused on the issue of authenticity. Cultural heritage not only represents a physical space that embodies history but also provides an experiential space for tourists to engage and connect with the destination. Tourists' active participation in the process creates a genuine psychological perception that can influence their satisfaction with the tourism experience and lead to various intentions of loyalty [32]. The higher the level of authenticity perceived by tourists during the tour, the more likely they are to develop a lasting attraction to tourism and form a vivid image of the destination. This, in turn, results in a more satisfying tourism experience, a greater intention to recommend, and a willingness to revisit [33]. In their study on Tianjin's 'Five Roads', Chao and Wang (2021) discovered that both the perception of object authenticity and the perception of existence authenticity directly and positively impact tourist loyalty [34]. Object authenticity includes both objective authenticity and constructed authenticity. This study adopts Wang's (1999) [13] categorization method to divide the perception of authenticity into object-related perception and existential perception, where the former encompasses both the objective perception and the constructed perception of authenticity. We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.*

H2: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.*

3.2. Intermediary Role of Tourist Engagement

The concept of 'tourist engagement' is primarily derived from the notion of 'customer engagement' [35]. In the context of cultural tourism, Prentice et al. (2001) observed that more active tourists often seek a deeper level of interaction with the culture of the destination they visit [36]. Building upon this, So (2014) developed a five-dimensional scale for measuring tourism brand engagement based on a literature review [37]. Taheri et al. (2014) emphasized the need for further research on the concept of tourist engagement, highlighting that it encompasses qualities such as attachment, emotional connection, commitment, and devotion [38]. Wang et al. (2015) applied the theory of customer engagement to the tourism industry and suggested that due to the unique nature of cultural heritage tourist

destinations, tourists have a greater demand for engagement [39]. Tourist engagement include the person's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral connections with the destination, which are established through communication, interaction, or other non-transactional behaviors, all of which are based on tourism expectations. The concept of tourist engagement includes five first-order concepts: enthusiasm, attention, integration, interaction, and identification.

Tourist engagement refers to the emotional and behavioral connections that arise from a traveler's interaction with a destination and is closely linked to the satisfaction of the tourist's travel experience. MacCannell (1973) proposed that modern travelers are motivated by the desire to seek authenticity in tourist destinations [6]. A better perception of the cultural authenticity of a destination increases the likelihood of a satisfactory travel experience. The perception of authenticity not only influences the outcome of the tourism experience but also serves as an important factor that stimulates, attracts, and encourages tourists to visit. Additionally, it facilitates positive interaction and communication between tourists and tourist destinations [19,40]. In summary, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on tourist engagement.*

H3a: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on identification.*

H3b: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive effect on attention.*

H3c: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive effect on enthusiasm.*

H3d: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on interaction.*

H3e: *The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on integration.*

H4: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on tourist engagement.*

H4a: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on identification.*

H4b: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on attention.*

H4c: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on enthusiasm.*

H4d: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on interaction.*

H4e: *The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on integration.*

According to the logic of service dominance, Fan and Chai (2017) proposed that customer engagement mediates the influence of customer engagement on regular brand loyalty in online brand communities [41]. Zhang and Chen (2017) discovered that tourists who trust and are satisfied with a travel brand are more likely to exhibit positive behavioral intentions towards the brand [42]. Additionally, tourists who develop a commitment to the travel brand are also more likely to take action. Lin and Yu (2019) analyzed the relationship among online flow experience, brand engagement, and brand loyalty in the context of online shopping VR [43]. They concluded that there is a direct positive relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty. In summary, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: *Tourist engagement has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.*

H5a: *Identification has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

H5b: *Attention has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

H5c: *Enthusiasm has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

H5d: *Interaction has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.*

H5e: *Integration has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.*

Based on the analysis above, it can be speculated that tourists' perception of the authenticity of tourist destinations may influence their loyalty behavior. This influence may be mediated by tourist engagement. When tourists perceive the authenticity of a historical district, it enhances their appreciation of and interest in its historical and cultural heritage. Consequently, tourists are more inclined to engage in word-of-mouth recommendations and revisit the destination. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: *Tourist engagement plays an intermediary role in the relationship between object-related authenticity perception and tourist loyalty.*

H7: *Tourist engagement plays an intermediary role in the relationship between existential authenticity and tourist loyalty.*

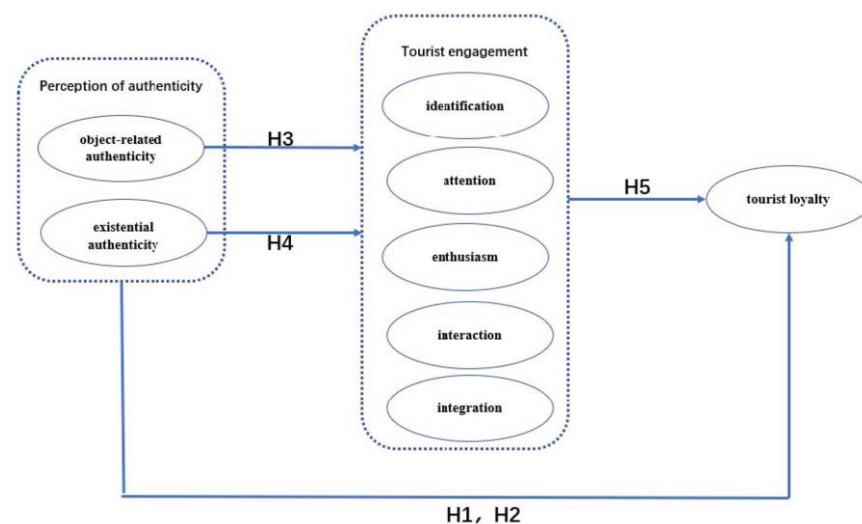In summary, the conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Conceptual model diagram.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Case Site Profile

This paper examines West Street (WS) in Dujiangyan city as a case study. West Street is located in the buffer zone of the world heritage Dujiangyan water conservancy project in Sichuan province, China. The block consists of more than 120 traditional wooden buildings. These buildings serve as a true representation of the typical urban life in traditional Chengdu. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, West Street was a famous commercial block with mud, wood, carving, alteration, stone, and iron and also scattered with some inns and restaurants for passengers to rest. After the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, West Street has been refreshed and built into an eye-catching street of characteristic style bars, which has boosted the development of the local economy and has become a must visit scenic spot for tourists to Dujiangyan city. Figure 2 shows landscape photos of West Street.

Figure 2. Traditional wooden structures buildings and handicraft shops in West Street.

4.2. Variable Measurement

The questionnaire consists of four modules: object-related authenticity, existence authenticity, tourist loyalty, and demographic variables. The measurement of object authenticity and existence authenticity is based on the methods proposed by Kolar et al. (2010) and Zhou et al. (2013) [19,31], respectively. Four questions are used to measure object-related authenticity and six to measure existential authenticity. The measurement scale for tourist engagement is based on the scales developed by So et al. (2014) [37] and Wang et al. (2015) [39] and includes five dimensions: identification (IF), attention (AT), enthusiasm (ES), interaction (IA), and integration (IG). Tourist loyalty is measured using the methods proposed by Bai et al. (2010) [44] and Day et al. (1969) [45], with three questions. A Likert 5-point scale, where 1 represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree, is used for all modules except for demographic variables.

In this study focusing on Chinese tourists, the English scale was finalized after a process of translation and back-translation to ensure accuracy. Initially, the original scale was translated into English and adjusted to fit the characteristics of the historical block and the study's objectives. Subsequently, two associate professors specializing in tourism management reviewed and revised the scale to improve clarity and remove overly rigid expressions. Lastly, another associate professor in tourism management translated the revised Chinese scale back into English for comparison with the original, ensuring consistency. Any discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached. The specific measurement items can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the normal distribution test.

Constructs and Items	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
Object-related authenticity (OA)			
The overall architecture and impression of the building inspired me (OA1)	4.143	−0.52	0.418
I appreciated how the site harmonizes with the appealing landscape and history (OA2)	4.094	−0.532	0.203
Interesting knowledge and information about WS (OA3)	4.017	−0.583	−0.062
I like the activities here (OA4)	3.648	−0.141	−0.117
Existential authenticity (EA)			
This tour gave me an insight into the history of WS (EA1)	3.878	−0.463	−0.323
During the tour, I felt a connection to the relevant history and legends (EA2)	3.819	−0.656	0.069
I love this unique spiritual experience on WS (EA3)	3.819	−0.544	0.253
I like the peaceful atmosphere of WS (EA4)	3.833	−0.576	−0.455
Identification (IF)			
I'm proud of visiting WS (IF1)	3.787	−0.507	−0.005
I'm very concerned about how others perceive WS (IF2)	3.293	0.108	−0.681
I'd feel embarrassed by negative information about WS (IF3)	3.244	0.222	−0.62
I feel happy when people praise WS (IF4)	3.909	−0.599	0.204

Table 1. *Cont.*

Constructs and Items	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attention (AT)			
I want to know more about WS (AT1)	3.854	−0.452	0.234
I continue to track and follow the updates on WS (AT2)	3.585	−0.112	−0.593
Information related to WS will get my attention (AT3)	3.798	−0.515	0.278
Post-tour, I desired a deeper understanding of it (AT4)	3.812	−0.55	0.326
Enthusiasm (ES)			
I love traveling to WS (ES1)	3.99	−0.488	0.758
My passion for WS could last a long time (ES2)	3.693	−0.259	−0.289
I'm glad I got to travel to WS (ES3)	3.822	−0.443	0.031
Keeping up with WS has become a part of my life (ES4)	3.087	0.103	−0.191
Interaction (IA)			
I find it intriguing when others visit WS (IA1)	3.819	−0.8	1.308
I just love talking to other people about WS (IA2)	3.62	−0.4	−0.121
I appreciate sharing my insights on WS (IA3)	3.648	−0.476	0.144
I frequently engage with West Street-related content online (IA4)	2.993	0.163	−0.699
Integration (IG)			
When interacting with WS, I become fully immersed and oblivious (IG1)	3.303	−0.211	0.01
I'm constantly reminded of WS in my life (IG2)	3.237	−0.24	−0.174
I will readily contribute to West Street's needs without hesitation (IG3)	3.596	−0.367	−0.211
Tourist loyalty (TL)			
I would favor WS if given similar opportunities (TL1)	3.672	−0.726	0.866
I will recommend my experience to a friend (TL2)	4.111	−0.827	1.41
I would like to recommend this tourist attraction to online users (TL3)	3.889	−0.665	0.487

4.3. Data Collection and Sample Structure

This study focused on tourists who engaged in tourism activities on West Street, Dujiangyan city. The research methodology involved conducting a questionnaire survey using on-site distribution questionnaires and on-site recycling questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed through simple random sampling. Between 28 June and 6 July 2023, the research group visited West Street to distribute the questionnaires. Before distributing the questionnaires, the visitors were verbally asked if they had completed the tour of West Street. To encourage questionnaire completion and visitor participation, a small gift was provided to each participant who carefully filled out the questionnaire. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed by the research group, and 287 valid questionnaires were collected, resulting in an effective recovery rate of 82%.

The demographic characteristics of the surveyed samples are as follows: Approximately 31% of the respondents were male, while 69% were female, which is a significant proportion worth of notice. Furthermore, individuals over the age of 40 accounted for 26% of the sample, suggesting that the majority of respondents were young and middle-aged individuals. At the time of this survey, the COVID-19 control measures had recently been lifted, and there were no foreign tourists present. All the respondents were domestic tourists. Nearly 40% of respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher, with more than 30% earning CNY 5000 per month.

4.4. Methods of Data Analysis

In this paper, SPSS 26.0 software was used to analyze the reliability of the scale, and AMOS 26.0 software was used to conduct a validation factor analysis to examine the issue of scale validity. For hypothesis testing, this study utilized SPSS 26.0 software to conduct correlation analysis, layer-by-layer regression analysis, and bootstrapping.

5. Results

5.1. Reliability and Validity Test

Reliability refers to the ability of the measurement results to withstand repeated testing, meaning whether the measurement tool can consistently measure the desired data. In this

study, the reliability of the scale was analyzed by using SPSS 26.0 software. The results, presented in Table 2, indicate that the Cronbach's α coefficient for each component was above 0.7, indicating high internal consistency and reliability of the scale. Additionally, the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis for all items were mostly within the range of 0–1, suggesting that they approximately followed a normal distribution. Specific data can be found in Table 1.

Table 2. Test results for reliability and aggregate validity.

Construct	Item	Normalize Factor Load	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Object-related authenticity (OA)	OA1	0.779	0.557	0.834	0.831
	OA2	0.756			
	OA3	0.744			
	OA4	0.704			
Existential authenticity (EA)	EA1	0.736	0.538	0.823	0.850
	EA2	0.733			
	EA3	0.700			
	EA4	0.763			
Identification (IF)	IF1	0.730	0.473	0.781	0.790
	IF2	0.706			
	IF3	0.599			
	IF4	0.707			
Attention (AT)	AT1	0.802	0.632	0.873	0.872
	AT2	0.839			
	AT3	0.738			
	AT4	0.798			
Enthusiasm (ES)	ES1	0.730	0.535	0.821	0.814
	ES2	0.800			
	ES3	0.693			
	ES4	0.697			
Interaction (IA)	IA1	0.732	0.534	0.820	0.816
	IA2	0.793			
	IA3	0.745			
	IA4	0.645			
Integration (IG)	IG1	0.784	0.526	0.767	0.786
	IG2	0.759			
	IG3	0.622			
Tourist loyalty (TL)	TL1	0.782	0.515	0.761	0.746
	TL2	0.672			
	TL3	0.695			

Validity is primarily assessed through aggregate validity and discriminant validity. The general criteria for aggregate validity include standardized load factors above 0.5 for all question factors and an average variance extracted (AVE) greater than 0.5. However, some scholars found that an AVE between 0.36 and 0.5 is also acceptable [46]. In this study, the sample data presented in Table 2 demonstrate that except for the agreed variable with an AVE value of 0.473, the AVE of the remaining variables was higher than 0.5. Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) for each dimension ranged from 0.761 to 0.873 (>0.7), and all questions had normalized factor load coefficients greater than 0.5, indicating strong aggregate validity of the scale.

The validity of a test can be determined by examining the correlation coefficient between the variables. According to Wu (2010), the correlation coefficient between any two variables should be less than the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each variable [47]. Table 2 provides an overview of the AVE values for each variable. It is observed that the AVE square root value of individual variables is less than or equal to the

correlation coefficient between variables, as shown in Table 3. However, the remaining AVE values in the horizontal and vertical directions are greater than the correlation coefficient between variables. This suggests that the scale demonstrates a clear discrimination validity.

Table 3. Results of discriminative validity analysis.

	OA	EA	IF	AT	ES	IA	IG	TL
OA	0.557							
EA	0.774	0.538						
IF	0.593	0.650	0.473					
AT	0.589	0.589	0.667	0.632				
ES	0.636	0.676	0.659	0.739	0.535			
IA	0.567	0.619	0.614	0.674	0.744	0.534		
IG	0.530	0.592	0.627	0.610	0.684	0.731	0.526	
TL	0.622	0.608	0.542	0.698	0.707	0.691	0.641	0.515
Square root of AVE	0.746	0.733	0.687	0.795	0.731	0.731	0.725	0.718

Note: The diagonal data are the AVE values of the dimensions. OA = object-related authenticity; EA = existential authenticity; IF = identification; AT = attention; ES = enthusiasm; IA = interaction; IG = integration; TL = tourist loyalty.

5.2. Hypothesis Testing

To investigate the relationship among perception of authenticity, tourist engagement, and tourist loyalty, this study utilized statistical analysis techniques such as SPSS 26 software, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and the bootstrapping method. The study examined the relationships among the dimensions of authenticity perception, those of tourist engagement, and the variables of tourist loyalty. The results of the correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation ($p < 0.01$) among authenticity perception, tourist engagement, and tourist loyalty.

5.2.1. Main Effect Test

To examine the relationship between authenticity perception and tourist engagement, we constructed an inspection model by using two dimensions of authenticity perception and five dimensions of identification, attention, enthusiasm, interaction, and integration. Control variables such as gender, age, education level, and income were also included. The dependent variables in this model were tourist engagement and loyalty. The results are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression statistical results (based on tourism engagement).

Variable	Model	Object-Related Authenticity	Existential Authenticity	R^2	ΔR^2	F
Identification	M1	0.574 ***		0.412	0.32	32.663
	M2		0.641 ***	0.412	0.32	32.663
Attention	M3	0.580 ***		0.388	0.326	29.584
	M4		0.59 ***	0.387	0.325	29.476
Enthusiasm	M5	0.63 ***		0.433	0.385	35.688
	M6		0.683 ***	0.483	0.435	43.68
Interaction	M7	0.563 ***		0.35	0.307	25.178
	M8		0.627 ***	0.41	0.367	32.395
Integration	M9	0.53 ***		0.302	0.272	20.216
	M10		0.604 ***	0.37	0.34	27.43

Note: *** means $p < 0.001$.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression statistical results (based on tourist loyalty).

Model	OA	EA	IF	AT	ES	IA	IG	R^2	ΔR^2	F
M11	0.605 ***							0.439	0.354	36.552
M12		0.602 ***						0.423	0.338	34.186
M13			0.544 ***					0.354	0.269	25.532
M14				0.69 ***				0.531	0.446	52.794
M15					0.694 ***			0.543	0.458	55.361
M16						0.676 ***		0.522	0.437	51.004
M17							0.623 ***	0.146	0.376	39.925
M18	0.451 ***		0.268 ***					0.481	0.042	36.992
M19		0.438 ***	0.255 ***					0.457	0.034	33.548
M20	0.314 ***			0.501 ***				0.593	0.154	58.109
M21		0.298 ***		0.514 ***				0.585	0.162	56.196
M22	0.281 ***				0.513 ***			0.588	0.149	56.954
M23		0.236 ***			0.535 ***			0.571	0.148	53.02
M24	0.33 ***					0.488 ***		0.594	0.155	58.269
M25		0.289 ***				0.5 ***		0.57	0.147	52.866
M26	0.382 ***						0.421 ***	0.563	0.123	51.28
M27		0.348 ***					0.421 ***	0.534	0.112	45.735

Note: OA = object-related authenticity; EA = existential authenticity; IF = identification; AT = attention; ES = enthusiasm; IA = interaction; IG = integration. *** means $p < 0.001$.

This study found that after controlling for demographic variables such as gender, age, educational background, permanent residence, and monthly income, both object-related authenticity perception (M11; β = 0.605, $p < 0.001$) and existential authenticity perception (M12; β = 0.602, $p < 0.001$) had significant positive effects on tourist loyalty behavior, thereby supporting H1 and H2. Additionally, this study found that identification (M13; β = 0.544, $p < 0.001$), attention (M14; β = 0.690, $p < 0.001$), enthusiasm (M15; β = 0.694, $p < 0.001$), interaction (M16; β = 0.676, $p < 0.001$), and integration (M17; β = 0.623, $p < 0.001$) also had significant positive effects on tourist loyalty, supporting H5a, H5b, H5c, H5d, and H5e. Furthermore, object-related authenticity perception was found to have a significant positive effect on identification (M1; β = 0.574, $p < 0.001$), attention (M3; β = 0.580, $p < 0.001$), enthusiasm (M5; β = 0.630, $p < 0.001$), interaction (M7; β = 0.563, $p < 0.001$), and integration (M9; β = 0.530, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H3a, H3b, H3c, H3d, and H3e. The perception of existential authenticity had a significant positive effect on identification (M2; β = 0.641, $p < 0.001$), attention (M4; β = 0.59, $p < 0.001$), enthusiasm (M6; β = 0.683, $p < 0.001$), interaction (M8; β = 0.627, $p < 0.001$), and integration (M10; β = 0.604, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4a, H4b, H4c, H4d, and H4e.

5.2.2. Mediation Effect Test

Bootstrapping was used to analyze the intermediate effect of tourist engagement. Model 4 was selected, with object-related authenticity and existential authenticity as independent variables and tourist loyalty as the dependent variable. The mediating effect of tourist engagement was tested through 5000 repeated samples at a 95% confidence interval. The results, presented in Table 6, indicate that the 95% confidence intervals for the two paths of tourist engagement in object-related authenticity/existential authenticity and tourist loyalty are [0.324, 0.521] and [0.339, 0.552], respectively. Both intervals exclude 0, suggesting a strong mediating effect at both stages. Therefore, tourist engagement partially mediates the relationship between object-related authenticity/existential authenticity and tourist loyalty, supporting hypotheses H6 and H7. Tourists who perceive high authenticity believe that they can spiritually engage with the tourist destination through the experience of historical districts. This strong connection between individuals and destinations can motivate tourists to consider revisiting or recommending the place. Conversely, a lack of engagement during a tourism experience can discourage loyalty among tourists.

Table 6. Analysis results of mediating effect.

Model Pathway	Variable	Effect	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval		Effect Ratio
				LLCI	ULCI	
OA → TE → TL	Tourist engagement	0.422	0.050	0.324	0.521	66.36%
	Identification	−0.069	0.041	−0.154	0.008	−10.80%
	Attention	0.172	0.043	0.091	0.261	27.06%
	Enthusiasm	0.118	0.045	0.033	0.211	18.53%
	Interaction	0.116	0.038	0.044	0.193	18.24%
	Integration	0.085	0.031	0.025	0.148	13.33%
	Direct effect	0.214	0.052	0.110	0.314	33.64%
	Total effect	0.635	0.060	0.527	0.764	
EA → TE → TL	Tourist engagement	0.444	0.054	0.339	0.552	75.29%
	Identification	−0.069	0.041	−0.152	0.010	−11.69%
	Attention	0.178	0.044	0.097	0.269	30.14%
	Enthusiasm	0.128	0.047	0.039	0.223	21.76%
	Interaction	0.120	0.040	0.043	0.203	20.33%
	Integration	0.087	0.033	0.022	0.151	14.75%
	Direct effect	0.146	0.051	0.045	0.244	24.71%
	Total effect	0.589	0.055	0.479	0.692	

Note: OA = object-related authenticity; EA = existential authenticity; TE = tourist engagement; TL = tourist loyalty. Arrows indicate the impact of the former on the latter.

5.2.3. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

In this section, the relationships among authenticity perception, tourist engagement and tourist loyalty are derived through a layer-by-layer regression analysis with mediated effects analysis, and the hypothesized results are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Summary of hypothetical results.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H2: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H3a: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on identification.	Supported
H3b: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive effect on attention.	Supported
H3c: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive effect on enthusiasm.	Supported
H3d: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on interaction.	Supported
H3e: The perception of object-related authenticity has a positive impact on integration.	Supported
H4a: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on identification.	Supported
H4b: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on attention.	Supported
H4c: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on enthusiasm.	Supported
H4d: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive impact on interaction.	Supported
H4e: The perception of existential authenticity has a positive effect on integration.	Supported
H5a: Identification has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H5b: Attention has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H5c: Enthusiasm has a positive effect on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H5d: Interaction has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H5e: Integration has a positive impact on tourist loyalty.	Supported
H6: Tourist engagement plays an intermediary role in the relationship between object-related authenticity perception and tourist loyalty.	Supported
H7: Tourist engagement plays an intermediary role in the relationship between existential authenticity and tourist loyalty.	Supported

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Discussion

For the sustainable development of historical blocks, ensuring the authenticity of cultural preservation and implementing a controlled level of tourism are essential to achieving long-term sustainability. In the field of hospitality and tourism, extensive research has been carried out on tourist loyalty, leading to the development of various theoretical models that incorporate variables such as place attachment [48], involvement [49], emotional solidarity [50], and tourism satisfaction [51]. However, these studies have not fully explored the participation process of tourists and the interaction between tourists and cultural heritage. This paper aims to broaden the research perspective by examining tourists' perception of authenticity in cultural heritage tourism. Additionally, it seeks to validate MacCannell's stage authenticity theory from a different perspective. In today's fast-paced world, modern tourists are in search of relaxation and a genuine connection with the local lifestyle. By enhancing their perception of the cultural authenticity of the tourist destination, tourists can have a more fulfilling travel experience, which may increase their willingness to recommend and revisit the destination.

This article's proposed measurement scale demonstrates both reliability and validity in effectively assessing latent variables. The consistency and convergent effectiveness of the tools also show acceptable discriminative validity. These results suggest that tourists' perception of historical blocks' authenticity can be accurately measured. Furthermore, the research findings support the hypothetical link between object-related authenticity/existential authenticity and tourist loyalty. The data analysis in this article supports the impact of authentic perception on tourist loyalty, aligning with the findings obtained by Kolar and Zabkar [19]. However, this study reveals that the influence of object-related authenticity and existential authenticity on tourism loyalty is more pronounced. This trend could be attributed to the rapid urbanization and significant social transformations in China, where traditional lifestyles and historical neighborhoods are evolving into picturesque environments that modern tourists find appealing. This shift has led Chinese tourists to exhibit a greater interest in traditional cultural heritage sites. Additionally, the respondents in this study, who were all domestic tourists, possessed a deep understanding of the history and culture of West Street in Dujiangyan City. This familiarity with the authenticity of West Street fosters stronger tourist engagement.

The concept of engagement in academic research has primarily focused on marketing, particularly in areas such as 'customer engagement' and 'brand engagement' [35,37]. However, there has been limited research on 'tourist engagement'. Furthermore, there is a lack of discussion on the relationship between tourism authenticity and tourist engagement. This study indicates that engagement acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between authenticity perception and tourist loyalty, supporting the research perspective of scholars like Bryce [40]. While Bryce focused on cultural heritage tourists from developed countries such as Japan, this study suggests that the mediating role of tourist engagement is also relevant in historical block tourism in developing countries. This underscores the crucial role of tourist engagement in elucidating tourist loyalty.

6.2. Conclusions

Sustainability is a prevalent theme in global urban development. Despite this, many developing countries and regions encounter challenges in preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable development during urbanization. This article delves into the correlation between authenticity and loyalty in historical blocks from the viewpoint of tourists, offering fresh perspectives on sustainable urban development within a globalized context. Furthermore, it examines the role of tourist engagement as a mediator in the relationship between authenticity perception and tourist loyalty. By conducting a case study on West Street in Dujiangyan city, this paper aims to uncover the underlying mechanism and limitations of how tourism authenticity affects tourist loyalty behavior. The study concludes with the following findings.

Both object-related authenticity perception and existential authenticity perception have a substantial positive influence on tourist loyalty behavior, with comparable degrees of impact. Historical districts offer an authentic portrayal of a city's historical and cultural background, allowing tourists to assess whether the visual landscape and cultural activities in these areas are artificially constructed or possess genuine historical significance. The findings further suggest that a greater level of authenticity in historical districts enriches tourists' travel experiences, resulting in heightened loyalty.

Tourist engagement plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between object-related authenticity and existential authenticity, as well as tourist loyalty. Firstly, within the context of historical and cultural significance, both the perception of object authenticity and existential authenticity can influence tourists' response. The architecture of West Street exemplifies the historical style of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, preserving the authentic charm of old Chengdu. Traveling along the slate road allows tourists to immerse themselves in the historical background of West Street, generating a psychological state of recognition, interaction, and enthusiasm towards the rich historical heritage of the street. Situated near the Dujiangyan water conservancy project, West Street has been immersed in the sounds of river wind and water for thousands of years. Whether in the old teahouses tucked away in narrow alleys or on the mats by the river, these places are always bustling with people enjoying tea and engaging in conversations. This has given rise to a distinctive leisure culture in the region, which attracts the attention of foreign tourists eager to immerse themselves in it. Additionally, the compatibility between tourists and the destinations they visit can foster a sense of loyalty among tourists. As tourists interact with the local community and become a part of their daily life, they have the opportunity to relish in delightful experiences. These experiences often leave a lasting impression on tourists, encouraging them to revisit the destination and recommend it to others based on their positive encounters.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations in this study. First, this paper introduces tourist engagement as a mediating variable, without considering whether there are antecedent variables before tourist engagement, such as tourist participation, motivation, etc., and the model of tourist engagement can be further expanded in the future. Second, the research object of this paper only considers historical blocks and does not involve other types of tourist destinations, and tourist engagement can be further introduced into research on other types of tourist destinations in the future.

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