Effect of Commercialization on Tourists’ Perceived Authenticity and Satisfaction in the Cultural Heritage Tourism Context: Case Study of Langzhong Ancient City

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Abstract: Although some studies claim that tourism commercialization can promote the authentic experience and behaviour of tourists, there is a lack of empirical support. The main purpose of this study is to identify whether tourism commercialization can positively impact tourists’ perceived authenticity and tourist satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism. We divide tourism authenticity into objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, existential authenticity and postmodern authenticity and propose a relationship model of tourism commercialization, the four authenticities, tourist satisfaction and loyalty. A survey was conducted in Langzhong Ancient City, a representative millennium-old county in China. A total of 618 valid domestic tourist questionnaires were collected. The partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) suitable for theory development was used for the conceptual model validation. The results indicate that tourism commercialization positively affects objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity and tourist satisfaction; the four authenticities positively affect tourist satisfaction, while only objective and existential authenticity and tourist satisfaction positively affect tourist loyalty. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: tourism commercialization; perceived authenticity; tourist satisfaction; tourist loyalty; cultural heritage tourism

1. Introduction

The concept of authenticity is closely related to heritage tourism, especially cultural heritage tourism [1–3]. Seeking authenticity is one of the main trends in heritage tourism [4] because people want to identify and understand themselves or reminisce about the past by looking back to the old ways of life and cultural traditions [5,6]. As the core attribute of heritage tourism destinations [7], authenticity links and influences both the supply and demand sides of heritage sites [3,8]. Therefore, authenticity is widely used in the field of heritage tourism practice and tourist behaviour research (e.g., [9–14]). Compared with actual authenticity, perceived authenticity has more value [6,8,15]. It is a bridge between heritage authenticity and tourist experience [16]. At present, many studies have established authenticity-related models to explore the effect of object-related (including objective and constructive), existential and even postmodern authenticity perception on heritage tourist satisfaction or/and loyalty (e.g., [1,2,4,7,9,15,17–20]). However, these models only consider authenticity and cannot effectively explain a universal phenomenon: successful heritage sites are usually those with higher commercialization but more tourists, while those with more primitive features and less commercialization have fewer visitors. The phenomenon is very obvious in ancient cities, old towns, ancient villages and historical districts in China, such as Lijiang Ancient City, Zhouzhaung Ancient Town and Shaolin Monastery [21,22]. This is the main reason why this research introduces tourism commercialization.
Heritage tourism is essentially a form of tourism that attracts tourists based on the commercialization of historical and cultural assets [7]. A heritage site not only draws tourists to experience the authentic past, but it also provides them with a place for entertainment, relaxation and consumption [23]. That is, heritage tourism development inevitably encounters commercialization [21]. From a demand perspective, heritage tourism is an emotional experience, the perception of tourists at its core [24]. However, although many studies believe that tourism commercialization can have a positive impact on tourists’ authenticity experience (e.g., [1, 25, 26]) and satisfaction (e.g., [27, 28]), there is a lack of support by empirical research in the context of cultural heritage tourism. Therefore, if empirical research can support tourism commercialization to have a positive impact on the authenticity perception of heritage tourists, it will be able to better understand the behaviour of cultural heritage tourists and better guide the sustainable development of cultural heritage tourism destinations.

The main purpose of this study is to examine whether tourism commercialization can have a positive impact on tourists' perceived authenticity and satisfaction in the cultural heritage context and to explain a common phenomenon. However, this study does not object to the negative impact of tourism commercialization on tourists’ experience and behaviour. The authenticity of cultural heritage tourism is deconstructed into four categories: objective, constructive, existential and postmodern [29, 30], and their structural relationships with tourism commercialization and tourist satisfaction and loyalty are proposed. Overall, this research has four contributions. First, it explores the effect of tourism commercialization on four types of perceived authenticity and tourist satisfaction through empirical research. Second, it examines the direct effect of postmodern authenticity on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Third, it discusses the difference in effectiveness of the four authenticities coexisting on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Lastly, it provides an analytical framework for maintaining the balance between tourism commercialization and authenticity, which helps to promote the outcomes of heritage tourist experience.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Tourism Authenticity

MacCannell [31] proposed the concept of 'staged authenticity' and introduced it into tourist motivation and experience research, after which authenticity became a hot topic in tourism research. However, as MacCannell [31, 32] did not give a clear definition of authenticity, this caused various meanings and types of authenticity to emerge, such as staged and true authenticity [31], symbolic authenticity [33], constructive authenticity [26, 34], emergent authenticity [26], hot and cold authenticity [35], hyper-reality [36], existential authenticity [5, 37, 38], indexical and iconic authenticity [39], customized authenticity [40], etc. In fact, tourism authenticity is a multifaceted concept that leads to the need for multiple perspectives to coexist in its study [29]. Epistemologically, however, these authenticities can be classified into objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, existential authenticity and postmodern authenticity [30, 37]. Additionally, current empirical studies show that they can be perceived by tourists during their travels (e.g., [2, 4, 19]).

Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of originals [37] or that which is recognized by authority [41]. Constructive authenticity refers to the tourists’ projection of the authenticity of toured objects [37]. Existential authenticity refers to the potential state of being activated by tourist activities [37]. Postmodern authenticity has nothing to do with toured objects being authentic or inauthentic because in many cases toured objects are contrived attractions that are imagined, fantasized or simulated without original references [37]. In a cultural heritage tourism destination, objective authenticity often corresponds to the core attractions that have survived from the past, constructive authenticity means that the heritage site can be changed and reconstructed, existential authenticity is activity related or environment induced and postmodern authenticity refers to the objects that are simulated, imitated and even created. The four authenticities basically cover all objects and activities from premodern to modern and postmodern in cultural heritage sites.
In the past decade, the study of tourism authenticity has moved from conceptual elaboration and qualitative research to advanced empirical research. After Kolar and Zabkar [1] constructed an authenticity-centred model to explore the relationships between cultural motivation, object-based (i.e., object-related) and existential authenticity and loyalty, many studies borrowed and/or developed this theoretical model in the cultural heritage context (e.g., [2,4,15,17-20,42]). Among them, the positive relationship between objective, constructive and existential authenticity and tourist loyalty has indeed been verified [4,15,17-19]. Meanwhile, many other studies have also confirmed that objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity, respectively, have a positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism (e.g., [4,9]).

Although the direct relationship between postmodern authenticity and tourist satisfaction and loyalty has not been tested, Xie’s [43] research shows that tourists can have a satisfactory experience from the Li people’s bamboo-beating dance performance. The Aboriginal dance is a simulation and reproduction of past rituals [43], which belongs to postmodern authenticity. This suggests that postmodern authenticity has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction. Meanwhile, Yi, Fu, Yu and Jiang’s [19] research on heritage villages found that postmodern authenticity has a significant positive conditional indirect effect on the relationship between objective authenticity and tourist loyalty through existential authenticity. Souvenirs have postmodern authenticity; Fu, Liu, Wang and Chao [42] found that souvenirs’ authenticity has a significant positive impact on tourist loyalty. Thereby, postmodern authenticity is likely to have a positive impact on tourist loyalty in a cultural heritage context.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction.
Hypothesis 1a (H1a). Objective authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction.
Hypothesis 1b (H1b). Constructive authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction.
Hypothesis 1c (H1c). Existential authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction.
Hypothesis 1d (H1d). Postmodern authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). Authenticity positively affects tourist loyalty.
Hypothesis 2a (H2a). Objective authenticity positively affects tourist loyalty.
Hypothesis 2b (H2b). Constructive authenticity positively affects tourist loyalty.
Hypothesis 2c (H2c). Existential authenticity positively affects tourist loyalty.

Hypothesis 2d (H2d). Postmodern authenticity positively affects tourist loyalty.

2.2. Tourism Commercialization

Commercialization is defined as a commercial relationship established around tourism products and activities [44], while commodification is defined as a process by which things or activities are transformed into commodities or services based on their exchange-value for trade [26]. The distinction between them lies in whether the product or activity is controlled by the producer [44]. When there is no direct monetary exchange between the producer and tourists, there is only commercialization instead of commodification. Commodification is a special process of commercialization in which ‘all commodities are commercialized, but not all commercial activities are commodified’ [44]; thus, commercialization is more universal. In fact, commercialization is often used rather than commodification in the Chinese context (e.g., [21,22,27]).
For cultural heritage tourist destinations, tourism commercialization is a special commercial phenomenon which has the following characteristics: first, the transformation of the destination’s commercial function is mainly driven by tourism development rather than production and life, which is reflected in the fact that the commodity supply capacity of shops exceeds the actual purchase demand of local residents, their target customer groups being mainly tourists rather than local residents, and these types of tourism shops account for a large proportion, even more than life shops; second, the tourism products of the destination are seriously homogenized, traditional handicrafts are reduced and products produced by modern technology flood the local tourism market [21]. Additionally, tourism commercialization is also reflected in the aggravated commercial atmosphere, the increased exotic business culture, the diminished local life vitality with the emigration of Aboriginal people, the construction of commercial buildings, etc. [45]. The level of these characteristics reflects the extent of tourism commercialization, from lower commercialization to higher commercialization, to over commercialization. What is important is that the commercial presentation of authenticity should not exceed the threshold of tourists’ tolerance for inauthenticity, which mainly depends on the level of tourists’ knowledge about specific aspects [46].

All tourism forms encounter commercialization due to the fact that tourism and culture are sold as commodities to tourists [47,48]. There are two views in academia about the effect of commercialization on destination and tourist experiences. One view is that tourism commercialization has only negative effects: that it destroys local authenticity [32,49], reduces tourists’ perceived authenticity [50], damages the sustainable development of destinations and negatively affects tourists’ satisfaction and future behaviour [51,52].

Another view is that tourism commercialization is not always toxic (Zhou et al., 2013). This view not only accepts that tourism commercialization may lead to an increase in the number of migrants and the feeling of crowding at destinations, damaging the local environment, harming the sense of place, reducing the attractiveness of tourist attractions, affecting the daily life of local people and weakening their socioeconomic status and even causing the disappearance of the original meanings of traditional beliefs, cultures and customs [22,53], but it also holds that tourism commercialization can promote local economic development, create employment opportunities, increase local people’s and government’s financial revenue, present a positive local image, improve the survival and protection of traditional culture and folk customs, strengthen local people’s sense of identity and cultural protection consciousness [22,53], reconstruct and even enhance local authenticity [10,26], enrich destination attractions and promote tourists’ perception of destination authenticity [54]. This research mainly examines the impact of commercialization on tourists’ perception of authenticity.

Tourism commercialization creates opportunities for tourists to experience an authentic destination culture [43,55]. Zhou, Zhang and Edelheim’s [15] research on the Chinese calligraphy landscape indicates that tourists can still obtain a higher perception of objective authenticity and existential authenticity in a commercialized context. Xie’s [43] research on the Li dance suggests that commercialization helps tourists experience the authenticity of cultural heritage. The dance has postmodern authenticity [43] and existential authenticity [37]. In addition, the process of commercialization forms constructive authenticity and can be perceived by tourists [10,26,50]. These indicate that tourism commercialization may positively impact tourists’ perception of objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity. Of course, these inferences need to be tested by this research. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Tourism commercialization positively affects tourism authenticity.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a). Tourism commercialization positively affects objective authenticity.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b). Tourism commercialization positively affects constructive authenticity.
Hypothesis 3c (H3c). Tourism commercialization positively affects existential authenticity.

Hypothesis 3d (H3d). Tourism commercialization positively affects postmodern authenticity.

The extent of commercialization is one of the factors of tourist satisfaction evaluation [56]. Tourists accept a certain degree of commercialization [57], and most of them can have a satisfactory experience in the context of tourism commercialization [58]. Sun, Lin, Chen, Tseng and Gao’s [27] research on a Chinese heritage village showed that although the positive relationship between tourism commercialization and tourist satisfaction is not significant, it has an indirect positive effect through tourist perceived value and experience quality. When the level of destination commercialization increases, tourist satisfaction will also increase [27]. More clearly, Kim [28] found that commercialization has a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in a festival context. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). Tourism commercialization positively affects tourist satisfaction.

2.3. Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty

Satisfaction is the overall evaluation by consumers of their own consumption experience [59]. Tourist satisfaction comes from customer satisfaction in the field of marketing, which is usually defined as the comparative result of tourist pretour expectations and post-tour experiences [56,60]. The expectation-disconfirmation model is the most commonly used method for evaluating tourist satisfaction [8,61]. It shows that tourists compare the actual performance of the current destination with their pretour expectations. In addition to this approach, the perceived performance model, equity theory and norm theory are also used for tourist satisfaction evaluation [62]. The perceived performance model only considers tourists’ actual experiences at the destination and does not consider their pretour expectations, the equity theory compares tourists’ benefits and costs (including time, money and energy), and the norm theory compares tourists’ experience differences between the current destination and other destinations visited in the past. The integrated method is more effective for evaluating tourist satisfaction because tourists may have different travel motivations and satisfaction standards [62].

Loyalty is the most direct monitor to predict the future behaviour of tourists to a certain destination. Tourist loyalty is usually defined and measured in recommendation intention and revisiting intention [1,20,63]. However, with the widespread use of smartphone apps, sharing travel experiences through social media helps to improve overall post-tourism evaluation [64]. Thus, the measurement of tourist loyalty should add a dimension of sharing intention.

In the literature, tourist loyalty is mostly presented as a consequence, and its antecedents are usually tourist motivation, perceived value, experience quality, perceived authenticity, destination image, place attachment and tourist satisfaction [2,4,18,59,65]. Tourist satisfaction is often used as a mediator between tourist loyalty and other antecedents [39]. The positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and loyalty has been supported by several studies (e.g., [4,59,62,65]). Thus, the last hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5 (H5). Tourist satisfaction positively affects tourist loyalty.

Based on above hypotheses, the conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Site

Langzhong (阆中) Ancient City (LAC) is located in the northeast of Sichuan Province, China, with a history of more than 2300 years. It is known as one of the ‘four best-preserved ancient cities in China’ with Lijiang (丽江) Ancient City, Pingyao (平遥) Ancient City and Huizhou (徽州) Ancient City. However, unlike Lijiang and Pingyao ancient cities, LAC has not been overcommercialized due to tourism development [66]. As a thousand-year-old county, LAC is a typical Han (汉) nationality cultural heritage site, with a rich Spring Festival culture, Fengshui (风水) culture, Three Kingdoms culture, calendar culture, imperial examination culture, etc. The City Museum and Fengshui Museum are both located in LAC. LAC exhibits the urban texture of the Tang and Song Dynasties and retains the architectural style of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There are a large number of ancient houses, some of which are even earthen houses.

In order to develop tourism, the local government has repaired, reconstructed and rebuilt some important buildings, such as the Huaguang Tower, Zhongtian Tower and Confucian Temple, and renovated the overall style of LAC, and the locals have also created new tourism projects, such as the practice of soaking the feet with vinegar. LAC did not develop large-scale immigration due to tourism development. It is a tourism community and a living community, with a large number of Aborigines, primary and secondary schools, vegetable markets, churches, shops for locals and civic activity squares. Therefore, as a well-known domestic heritage tourism destination, although LAC has a certain degree of commercialization, it has not been overcommercialized. This represents the extent of tourism commercialization in most ancient cities and towns in China. LAC also has four types of authenticity, which make it a suitable research site.

In mid-June 2019, a formal survey, using onsite random sampling, was conducted at the core attractions and their located areas in the ancient city, conducted by the first author and trained students from the local tourism college. The target respondents were Chinese domestic tourists. Before the questionnaire was issued, the respondent would be asked if he or she was traveling; only respondents who answered ‘yes’ would be included in the survey. A total of 670 questionnaires were distributed and 653 were recovered, of which 618 were valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of 94.64%.

3.2. Measurement

Objective authenticity and constructive authenticity were based on the studies of Lu, Chi and Liu [8]; Nguyen and Cheung [67] and Zatori, Smith and Puczko [68]. Existential
authenticity came from the design of Yi, Fu, Yu and Jiang [19], and postmodern authenticity adopted the research of Yi, Fu, Yu and Jiang [19] and Wang [37]. Each type of authenticity had five items. Tourist satisfaction, based on the studies of Lee, Yoon and Lee [69] and Lu, Chi and Liu [8], included four items. Tourist loyalty had three items: in addition to recommend intention and revisit intention [1,20], we added a sharing intention [64]. The commercialization of tourism research in China is different from tourism commodification in the West [27]: it emphasizes the phenomenon [70]. Therefore, tourism commercialization items were extracted from Chinese scholars’ descriptions of the phenomenon of tourism commercialization [21,45], including eight items initially. These two studies are the most influential Chinese studies on the commercialization of heritage tourism, and they are widely downloaded and cited.

After the initial questionnaire was formed, items were discussed one-by-one to improve the content validity of the questionnaire. A pilot survey was conducted on students who had visited South Luogu Lane, the oldest historical and cultural street in Beijing, China. A total of 61 questionnaires were collected. The main purpose was to test the accuracy of the expression of the items. Moreover, factor analysis was used to test whether each construct satisfies unidimensionality. According to the feedback and testing, three items of tourism commercialization were deleted, and the expressions of its other two items and the two items of postmodern authenticity were slightly modified. Finally, there are 27 measurement items (Table 1) for the formal questionnaire. All items were measured by a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree). Furthermore, demographic indicators, such as gender, age and education level, were incorporated.

| Construct                      | Items                                                                 | Source   |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Objective authenticity        | OA1: Historic buildings are well preserved                           | [8,67,68]|
|                               | OA2: Layout and furnishings remain as original appearance            |          |
|                               | OA3: Recognized by authoritative departments and experts             |          |
|                               | OA4: History clearly documented                                      |          |
|                               | OA5: Attractions are mostly genuine                                 |          |
|                               | CA1: Reflect the local ancient living environment                    |          |
|                               | CA2: Represent the local past history                               |          |
| Constructive authenticity     | CA3: Represent the local past culture                                | [8,67,68]|
|                               | CA4: Represent local past traditions                                 |          |
|                               | CA5: Many attractions look like real                                |          |
| Existential authenticity      | EA1: Traveling here can free my body from daily work and life and make me more relaxed and feel like myself | [19]     |
|                               | EA2: Traveling here can improve myself, realize my dreams and even provide me with a sense of achievement |          |
|                               | EA3: Traveling here can promote family relationship and intimacy     |          |
|                               | EA4: Traveling here, I can contact local peoples in an authentic and friendly way |          |
|                               | EA5: Traveling here, I can contact other tourists in an authentic and natural way, without considering the difference of status or class |          |
|                               | PA1: The buildings I encounter here can be contrived, reproductions or simulations of the originals, even through imagination without reference | [19,37]  |
|                               | PA2: The local people I met here can just be acting, imitating or even imagined Indigenous people |          |
|                               | PA3: There is no absolute line between the real and the fake, since sometimes it is impossible to find the original as a reference |          |
|                               | PA4: Modern technology can make the inauthentic look more authentic  |          |
|                               | PA5: I just want to have a good time and enjoy it; I don’t care whether it is authentic or not |          |
|                               | TC1: The whole commercial atmosphere is higher                      | [21,37]  |
|                               | TC2: Many shops cater to tourists                                   |          |
| Tourism commercialization     | TC3: Many kinds of tourism commodities                               |          |
|                               | TC4: Most tourist commodities are produced by modern techniques      |          |
|                               | TC5: Many exotic business cultures                                  |          |
|                               | TS1: Overall satisfaction                                           | [8,69]   |
| Tourist satisfaction          | TS2: All expectations are realized                                  |          |
|                               | TS3: Happy and enjoyable                                           |          |
|                               | TS4: Time and money spent are satisfactory                          |          |
| Tourist loyalty               | TL1: Will revisit this place again                                  | [1,20,64]|
|                               | TL2: Will recommend this place to relatives, friends and acquaintances|          |
|                               | TL3: Will share this travel experience through social media         |          |
3.3. Data Analysis

Two statistical methods were applied to data analysis in this study. Descriptive analysis was used to analyse the respondents’ demographic and travel profile and the normality test of the measured variables. The PLS-SEM method was used for model evaluation for a few reasons. Firstly, this study is essentially exploratory research; secondly, the main purpose of this study is theory development and predicting the effect of tourism commercialization on tourists’ perceived authenticity and satisfaction; thirdly, PLS-SEM is more suitable for complex models and does not consider data normality [71]. In addition, combined with the requirements of threshold samples, the ten times rule and statistical power, 618 is a sufficient sample size [71]. SmartPLS3 software (version 3.2.9, SmartPLS GmbH, Boenningstedt, Germany) was used to evaluate the reflective measurement models and structural model [72].

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The demographic and travel profiles of the sample are shown in Table 2. Male respondents (52.6%) were slightly higher than female respondents (47.4%). A total of 62% of the respondents were aged 20–39 years, and 17.0% are aged 40–49 years. More than 40% of the respondents had an undergraduate degree or above, accounting for 30.9% of undergraduate degrees, and the total proportion of both reached 55%. State-owned enterprises and institutions had the largest number of personnel (28.3%), followed by freelancers (21.0%) and students (14.6%). The monthly income of tourists was the highest (44.5%) at the level of USD 312.5–781.3, followed by the level of USD 781.4–1250 (27.2%). About 60% of the respondents were revisitors, more than first visitors (40.1%). Most respondents travelled with family members (32.0%) or friends (41.6%), and group tourists accounted for a small proportion (8.4%). The first-order motivation of tourists was looking for existential authenticity (50.3%). The most important motivation was to relax physically and mentally (29.4%), and the second was to enhance the relationship between family members or friends (20.9%). The first-order tourist motivation was set as a single-choice item, but some respondents gave multiple choices; these questionnaires were then input as missing values, so the miss rates account for 4.0%.

Table 2. Demographic and travel profile (n = 618).

| Category                      | n   | Percentage | Category                      | n   | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-----|------------|-------------------------------|-----|------------|
| Gender                        |     |            | Monthly income (USD *)        |     |            |
| Male                          | 325 | 52.6       | <312.5                        | 89  | 14.4       |
| Female                        | 293 | 47.4       | 312.5–781.3                   | 275 | 44.5       |
| Missing                       | 0   | 0          | 781.4–1250                    | 168 | 27.2       |
| Age                           |     |            | 1250.1–1875                   | 47  | 7.6        |
| 16–19                         | 54  | 8.7        | >1875                         | 34  | 5.5        |
| 20–29                         | 183 | 29.6       | Missing                       | 5   | 0.8        |
| 30–39                         | 200 | 32.4       | Travel times before           | -   | -          |
| 40–49                         | 110 | 17.8       | 0                             | 248 | 40.1       |
| 50–59                         | 54  | 8.7        | 1                             | 172 | 27.8       |
| ≥60                           | 16  | 2.6        | 2–3                           | 131 | 21.2       |
| Missing                       | 1   | 0.2        | 4–6                           | 29  | 4.7        |
| Education                     |     |            | ≥7                            | 38  | 6.1        |
| Middle school or below        | 41  | 6.6        | Missing                       | 0   | 0          |
| High or technical school      | 165 | 26.7       | First-order travel motivation | -   | -          |
| Junior college                | 153 | 24.8       | Relax physically and mentally | 182 | 29.4       |
| Undergraduate                 | 191 | 30.9       | Enhance the relationship between | 129 | 20.9       |
| Master                        | 50  | 8.1        | Visit historical culture sites| 85  | 13.8       |
| Ph.D.                         | 15  | 2.4        | Increase knowledge            | 54  | 8.7        |
| Missing                       | 3   | 0.5        | Satisfy historical interest   | 47  | 7.6        |
Table 2. Cont.

| Category | n | Percentage | Category | n | Percentage |
|----------|---|------------|----------|---|------------|
| Occupation | - | - | Enjoy a peaceful atmosphere | 36 | 5.8 |
| State-owned enterprises and institutions | 175 | 28.3 | Discover new places and things | 46 | 7.4 |
| Government staff | 28 | 4.5 | Others | 14 | 2.3 |
| Employee | 34 | 5.5 | Missing | 25 | 4.0 |
| Businessman | 55 | 8.9 | Travel Companies | - | - |
| Teaching staff | 52 | 8.4 | None | 51 | 8.3 |
| Student | 90 | 14.6 | Family member | 198 | 32.0 |
| Retiree | 36 | 5.8 | Friend | 257 | 41.6 |
| Freelance | 130 | 21.0 | Lover | 45 | 7.3 |
| Others | 17 | 2.8 | Tourist groups | 52 | 8.4 |
| Missing | 1 | 0.2 | Others | 9 | 1.5 |
| - | - | - | Missing | 6 | 1.0 |

*Note: USD 1 = RMB 6.4.*

4.2. Evaluation of Measurement Models

Indicator loading and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to evaluate convergent validity, and composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s $\alpha$ were used to measure internal consistency reliability. Reflective indicator loading should be greater than 0.7, but it is often less than 0.7 in social science research, especially for a newly developed scale [73]. In this case, when the loading is less than 0.4, the indicator is deleted directly, and when the loading is between 0.4 and 0.7, if the indicator was deleted, the CR and AVE values exceed the recommended threshold, the indicator should be deleted, otherwise it should be kept [71].

Following these suggestions, when indicators TC5, CA5 and PA5 were deleted, the results of the PLS algorithm procedure (Table 3) show that CR values exceed 0.8, Cronbach $\alpha$ values are greater than 0.7 and AVE values are above 0.5 [71,74], indicating that all measurement models have ideal construct reliability and convergent validity.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity.

| Construct/Variables | Mean | S.D. | Loading | CR   | $\alpha$ | AVE  |
|---------------------|------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| Tourism commercialization | 5.476 | - | - | 0.819 | 0.706 | 0.532 |
| TC1 | 5.304 | 1.236 | 0.722 | - | - | - |
| TC2 | 5.638 | 1.128 | 0.744 | - | - | - |
| TC3 | 5.535 | 1.162 | 0.794 | - | - | - |
| TC4 | 5.428 | 1.277 | 0.650 | - | - | - |
| Objective authenticity | 5.305 | - | - | 0.839 | 0.767 | 0.513 |
| OA1 | 5.055 | 1.642 | 0.758 | - | - | - |
| OA2 | 5.326 | 1.367 | 0.774 | - | - | - |
| OA3 | 5.599 | 1.052 | 0.735 | - | - | - |
| OA4 | 5.673 | 1.050 | 0.700 | - | - | - |
| OA5 | 4.871 | 1.658 | 0.602 | - | - | - |
| Constructive authenticity | 5.598 | - | - | 0.895 | 0.843 | 0.680 |
| CA1 | 5.368 | 1.221 | 0.772 | - | - | - |
| CA2 | 5.654 | 1.105 | 0.839 | - | - | - |
| CA3 | 5.647 | 1.143 | 0.859 | - | - | - |
| CA4 | 5.723 | 1.167 | 0.827 | - | - | - |
| Existential authenticity | 5.539 | - | - | 0.837 | 0.756 | 0.508 |
| EA1 | 5.419 | 1.358 | 0.736 | - | - | - |
| EA2 | 4.982 | 1.497 | 0.750 | - | - | - |
| EA3 | 5.542 | 1.168 | 0.738 | - | - | - |
| EA4 | 5.579 | 1.174 | 0.709 | - | - | - |
| EA5 | 5.273 | 1.283 | 0.621 | - | - | - |
The heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, a better method than Fornell–Larcker criterion [75], was used to evaluate discriminant validity [71,76]. As shown in Table 4, all HTMT ratios are less than the critical value 0.9 (HTMT<0.9 criterion), indicating that the discriminant validity of the measurement models satisfies the requirement.

### Table 4. Discriminant validity with HTMT, $R^2$ and $Q^2$.

| Construct         | TC    | OA    | CA    | EA    | PA    | TS    | TL    | $R^2$ | $Q^2$ |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Tourism commercialization | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     |
| Objective authenticity | 0.423 | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | 0.101 | 0.041 |
| Constructive authenticity | 0.652 | 0.508 | -     | -     | -     | -     | -     | 0.259 | 0.174 |
| Existential authenticity | 0.368 | 0.623 | 0.509 | -     | -     | -     | -     | 0.075 | 0.037 |
| Postmodern authenticity | 0.560 | 0.185 | 0.477 | 0.318 | -     | -     | 0.176 | 0.101 |
| Tourist satisfaction | 0.540 | 0.665 | 0.608 | 0.711 | 0.369 | -     | -     | 0.464 | 0.281 |
| Tourist loyalty     | 0.424 | 0.612 | 0.548 | 0.642 | 0.322 | 0.885 | -     | 0.532 | 0.361 |

Note: $Q^2 = 1−SSE/SSO$.

### 4.3. Evaluation of the Structural Model

The path coefficient ($\beta$) and its significance (t value), determination coefficient ($R^2$) and predictive relevance ($Q^2$) were used for structural model evaluation. The bootstrapping procedure (subsamples = 5000) and blindfolding procedure (omission distance = 7) were conducted [71], as shown in Table 5 and Figure 2.

Authenticities, including objective authenticity (H1a: $\beta = 0.263, p < 0.001$), constructive authenticity (H1b: $\beta = 0.166, p < 0.001$), existential authenticity (H1c: $\beta = 0.300, p < 0.001$) and postmodernity authenticity (H2d: $\beta = 0.079, p < 0.05$), all had a positive impact on tourist satisfaction. Meanwhile, objective authenticity (H2a: $\beta = 0.139, p < 0.001$) and existential authenticity (H2c: $\beta = 0.105, p < 0.01$) had positive effects on tourist loyalty, while constructive authenticity (H2b: $\beta = 0.070, p > 0.05$) and postmodern authenticity (H2d: $\beta = 0.035, p > 0.05$) had no significant effects on tourist loyalty. Tourism commercialization positively affects tourist perceived authenticity, specifically objective authenticity (H3a: $\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001$), constructive authenticity (H3b: $\beta = 0.509, p < 0.001$), existential authenticity (H3c: $\beta = 0.274, p < 0.001$) and postmodern authenticity (H3d: $\beta = 0.420, p < 0.001$). Additionally, tourism commercialization positively affects tourist satisfaction (H4: $\beta = 0.129, p < 0.01$). Lastly, tourist satisfaction positively affects tourist loyalty (H5: $\beta = 0.536, p < 0.001$). Therefore, in addition to the hypotheses H2b and H2d, other hypotheses were supported.
The purpose of this study is to provide empirical support for the positive impact of tourism commercialization on tourists’ authenticity experience and behaviour in the context of cultural heritage tourism. A theoretical model of tourism commercialization, four authenticities and tourist satisfaction and loyalty was proposed. These elements were placed in a single empirical research framework for the first time, which can better explain cultural heritage tourist experience and produce valuable theoretical inspiration.
First, the hypothesis that tourism commercialization positively affects tourists’ authenticity perception was supported. The tourism commercialization level of LAC was slightly higher (construct mean = 5.476), and it had a positive effect on objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity. These provide empirical support to the views that tourism commercialization can exert positive effects on tourist authenticity experience [15,43]. Although tourism commercialization may undermine heritage authenticity [48,81], it can also have a positive effect on authenticity experience [54]. These are not binary opposites, but can coexist mutually beneficially [15,43]. This may be why some heritage sites that are commercialized in the eyes of experts can remain prosperous: commercialization does not change the object authenticity of core attractions of heritage sites; instead, it adds new attractions to their authenticity. This is why tourism commercialization has a greater impact on constructive and postmodern authenticity than objective and existential authenticity.

Second, tourism commercialization positively affects tourist satisfaction. This provides empirical support for the positive relationship between commercialization and satisfaction [28] in the field of heritage tourism. This result refutes the qualitative research conclusion that tourism commercialization reduces heritage tourist satisfaction [51]. Cultural heritage tourism is also essentially a commercial activity [82]. In reality, it is easy to find that prosperous heritage tourism sites are usually higher in commercialization, while those heritage sites that remain primitive and have low tourism development have few visitors. Why? Although lower commercialization means closer to originality and authenticity, it often fails to meet other needs besides tourists’ basic tourism needs and improve the quality of their experiences. Tourism commercialization can enrich the offerings of heritage sites, such as rich and diverse tourism products, high-quality hotel services, detailed tourism information and a more authentic atmosphere of tourist experience, which means more tourist attractions can better meet the needs of tourists and enhance their satisfaction. Therefore, tourism commercialization is not exclusively bad for heritage tourism experience [27]. However, it is necessary to avoid overcommercialisation and maintain a balance between commercialization and authenticity [22,45].

Third, the effects of objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity on tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty were further clarified. Four authenticities positively affect tourist satisfaction. Objective authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction, which is consistent with the findings of Dominguez-Quintero, Gonzalez-Rodriguez and Paddison [9]. Constructive authenticity positively affects tourism satisfaction, supported the findings of Park, Choi and Lee [4]. Additionally, existential authenticity positively affects tourist satisfaction, which is highly consistent with the results of Dominguez-Quintero, Gonzalez-Rodriguez and Paddison [9] and Park, Choi and Lee [4]. In addition, postmodern authenticity also had a positive impact on tourist satisfaction, indicating that heritage tourists accept postmodern authenticity while pursuing authenticity [19]. However, objective and existential authenticity have greater effects on tourist satisfaction than constructive and postmodern authenticity.

Moreover, objective and existential authenticity alone positively affected tourist loyalty. The former supports the findings of Zhou, Zhang and Edelheim [15], and the latter supports some previous studies [1,2,9,18,19]. Constructive and postmodern authenticity had no significant effects on tourist loyalty. Meanwhile, objective authenticity had a greater effect on tourist loyalty than existential authenticity, indicating that tourist loyalty of heritage sites is mainly affected by the objective authenticity of core attractions.

5.2. Practical Implications

The relationships between tourism commercialization and four authenticities and their combined effects on tourist satisfaction and loyalty can better explain why successful cultural heritage tourism destinations are more prosperous. Developers, managers and marketers of heritage tourism should understand the practical implications of these findings in order to better promote the tourism practices of heritage sites and improve tourist experience outcomes.
First, commercialization can promote the sustainable development of tourism in cultural heritage sites. Tourism commercialization not only has a positive impact on cultural heritage sites [22,69], but it also helps to enhance tourist experience outcomes. Developers, managers and operators of heritage sites do not always have to take a negative and hostile attitude towards it. It is simply a common phenomenon, a problem faced by almost all successful cultural heritage tourism destinations. The most important assessors of whether tourism commercialization destroys the authenticity of cultural heritage sites are the actual and potential tourists, not tourism scholars, managers or operators, because the main purpose of developing heritage tourism is to attract tourists, develop local economies and better protect heritage. Tourists are the ultimate recipients and consumers of authenticity and commercialization.

Second, objective and existential authenticity are more important than constructive and postmodern authenticity. Objective authenticity plays a key role in the development of cultural heritage tourism [83], which has a great impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, tourism operators and managers should protect the object authenticity of the core offerings of cultural heritage sites [19]. Concerning the effect of existential authenticity on tourist satisfaction and loyalty, on the one hand, it explains the subjective nature of tourist experience [19]; on the other hand, it may be related to the motivation of current heritage tourists. Constructive and postmodern authenticity are not as important as objective authenticity, which indicates that the heritage site can be exploited artificially to a certain extent. However, it is necessary to maintain a harmony between contrived objects and the overall atmosphere [19].

6. Limitations and Future Research

This research has some limitations. Firstly, because the scale of tourism commercialization came from qualitative studies, a further test is needed in the future. In addition, tourism commercialization is a complicated concept, and this study focuses on designing a scale from its characterization. It should be possible to develop new scales from other perspectives. If the research perspective is changed, it should be possible to develop a new scale. Secondly, this article only examined the commercialization and authenticity perception of domestic tourists. Heritage tourism destinations also involve stakeholders such as foreign tourists, tourism operators, tourism employees and local residents. In the future, it is necessary to conduct a quantitative comparative study on their perception of authenticity and tourism commercialization. Thirdly, the data of this study was cross-sectional data, which also has shortcomings. Fourthly, there is the issue of whether the theoretical model can be generalized or not to obtain a general conclusion. Since the extent of tourism commercialization of LAC is at a medium level among ancient cities and towns in China, whether this model is suitable for other commercialization situations, such as the ancient cities of Huizhou, Lijiang and Pingyao, needs to be further tested in future research. In addition, familiarity and place attachment constructs can be introduced into the theoretical model. Finally, the data collection was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic, without considering the impact of the epidemic. However, the current epidemic in China has been brought under control, and the domestic tourism market has basically recovered.

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