Examining Structural Relationships among Brand Experience, Existential Authenticity, and Place Attachment in Slow Tourism Destinations

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Received: 21 January 2020; Accepted: 31 March 2020; Published: 1 April 2020

Abstract: Understanding how tourists’ brand experiences impact their existential authenticity, and the role of existential authenticity in the formation mechanism of place attachment to the destination, are key issues for the marketing of a destination. The current study examines the relationship between tourists’ experience, existential authenticity, and place attachment, and the indirect effect of existential authenticity on the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment from the oriental perspective against the slow tourism background. A self-administered survey was conducted at Yaxi town, the first international slow city in China. A total of 398 samples were analyzed using a two-step approach of the structural equation model (SEM). The findings show that destination brand experience partially impacts existential authenticity, and both the intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity (the sub-dimensions of existential authenticity) significantly influence place attachment. Additionally, affective and behavioral experience indirectly influence place attachment through existential authenticity. Based on the conclusions, theoretical and practical recommendations are considered.

Keywords: destination experience; existential authenticity; place attachment; slow tourism; structural equation model

1. Introduction

Authenticity has been acknowledged as an academic key word [1] and an essential cultural tourism motivation that drives visitors to a specific place [2–4]. It was acknowledged as a complex concept related to object-based authenticity (including objective authenticity and constructive authenticity) and existential authenticity [5]. Object-based authenticity refers to the authenticity judged by the tourism object—the tourism attraction [6]; while existential authenticity refers to an authentic experience judged by the tourism subject—tourists [7]. It is a state of being that can be produced or pursued through tourism activities and a state of being true to one’s own values and beliefs [8]. Present-day existential authenticity has received considerable attention in the tourism academic research [9–12]. In the context of modernity, people were suffering from a boring life and pressures, which eventually lead to a loss of the self [13]. The achievement of existential authenticity means that tourists could be more closed to a sense of freedom and obtain richer experiential encounters with the self [9]. Hence, the search for an authentic self has become an important motivation for tourists and a selling point for destination marketing [4].
The link between existential authenticity and place attachment has been discussed by previous studies [4,14,15]. In tourism backgrounds, tourists may achieve existential authenticity, and eventually obtain positive emotions or feelings (such as well-being) in the special place [2,7,9]. According to the concept of place attachment, when individuals have affectional relationships with a specific place, they may feel a sense of identity and dependence on the place [16,17]. In this context, existential authenticity is closely related to place attachment [14]. However, this relationship had no clear conclusion so far in prior studies. Some studies argued that perceived authenticity could be impacted by place attachment [14,15], while other studies suggested the opposite relations [4,18–20]. Few studies have focused on how to utilize the authentic experience to make tourists more attached to a destination. In addition, former studies of the underlying dimensions of existential authenticity have not been considered with those of place attachment. Thus, the effect of this interaction between place attachment and existential authenticity still needs further study.

Destination experience is another concept that needs to be discussed in the framework of existential authenticity. Previous studies argued that tourists’ perceived authenticity could be achieved through experience (basically related to intramural authenticity) derived from place or environment [21–23]. In other words, tourists may search for a meaning of life and self-development through their travel experiences. However, previous studies paid more attention to the causal relationship between object-based authenticity and existential authenticity; the empirical research that focuses on the influence of experience on existential authenticity is still insufficient. A handful studies attempted to use underlying dimensions of authenticity as a framework to substantiate existential authenticity empirically.

Although most researches on existential authenticity have focused on cultural heritage tourism, the strong linkages between authenticity and slow tourism or slow destination experiences have been noticed by researchers [24–28]. Slow tourism has received much attention due to the new ideas for better urban living in western countries. In recent years, the discussion about the new trend of sustainable tourism forms showed the rise of slow tourism, especially in China. Slow tourism, as an effective tool to attract more tourists, has been given much attention by both researchers and practitioners. A destination with “slow” potential could use “slow” to become a differentiated regional destination brand. Take Gaochun District for example, which is the home to the first Cittaslow in China. Before Yaxi become Cittaslow, there were only about 1.5 million visitors in 2009. However, after Yaxi became the Cittaslow in 2011, the number of visitors showed an obvious increasing trend and reached 9.7 million in 2017 [29]. Destinations with slow labels have a great market potential in China.

Several studies have pointed out that slow tourism, combined with slow cities, can help tourists enjoy their time while traveling and engage themselves with places and local people, focus more on sustainable tourism experiences and gain a deeper attachment to the destination [24,28,30–32]. As such, tourists can be more immersed in the destination and experience, which is hard to feel with “fast tourism” [24,27,28,30]. Additionally, slow tourism changes people’s lifestyle to a slower state that caters to people who want to embrace their true self. In slow tourism settings, tourists may achieve existential authenticity, since their selection to “slow down” may be satisfied by the requirements of being their true self, and they ultimately restore and enrich it [33]. Thus, a quality experience and the fine state of true self can be achieved through a “slow” featured tourism. Consequently, discussing the role of experience and existential authenticity simultaneously against a slow tourism background may propose new ideas on tourism contributing to revealing the interaction mechanism between tourists experience and existence authenticity.

The concepts of place attachment, authenticity, and experience are pivotal for destination marketing organizations and organizers (DOMs). However, few studies have incorporated experience, existential authenticity, and place attachment in one framework. This study seeks to address the research gaps by providing a new perspective on researching the formation of place attachment through tourism in terms of tourists experience and existential authenticity. In this study, the relationship between existential authenticity, destination experience, and place attachment will be explored; and the
predictors and outcomes of existential authenticity will be discussed against a slow tourism background with a quantitative approach. The purposes of this study are as follows: (1) Verifying existential authenticity’s constructs through both intra- and inter-personal authenticity to further extend the current knowledge on tourists’ psychology; (2) Exploring whether experience can influence whether tourists achieve a state of being their true self, and how the existential authenticity can be impacted by tourists experience; (3) Examining the formation mechanism of place attachment by examining the controversial relationship between place attachment and existential authenticity; (4) Testing how and why destination brand experiences influence place attachment through existential authenticity. Lastly, based on the findings, the current study may recommend more effective managerial marketing strategies for slow tourism destinations to better utilize authenticity, since it has become a significant concept for destination management.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Slow Tourism and its Sustainable Characteristics

In the late 1980s, the “slow philosophy” emerged from the Italian Slow Food movement and then rapidly triggered the worldwide Slow Movement in humans’ daily life, such as Slow City and Slow Tourism to promote a slower pace and way of life. Under the guidance of “slow philosophy”, it is suggested that slow tourism can be a different tourism choice that contributes to contrast with the negative externalities of mass tourism [24,25,28,33]. Slow tourism endows the meaning of rhythm and emphasizes the enjoyment of the journey, and it also connects tourists with places [28]. Although the idea of slow tourism has been widely accepted by researchers and practitioners, no clear definition of slow tourism has been established [24,28,33]. Websites, blogs, and forums are the first sources of interpretation of slow tourism, and they are dedicated to promoting “tranquil travel”. These concepts focus on visitors’ personal benefits by emphasizing the visitors’ mood and experience (e.g., psychological and physical well-being, quality experience, relaxation, or self-reflection) and ways of becoming a “slow tourist”. Soon after the establishment of the non-academic concept of “slow travel”, some academic researchers started to pay attention to “slow tourism”. Focusing on a different angle, researchers have emphasized the role of sustainability in determining slow tourism based on the positive impacts on tourism destinations and the aspect of environmentalism [24,25,32]. In its early notion, the academic literature paid more attention to the speed and mobilities of travel relating to the environmental and sustainability values of the destination. These studies argued that the more we use ecological transportation such as walking, cycling, and public traffic, the more we can replace carbon-emitting transport methods such as private cars and aircraft. Slow tourism has received more attention because of its sense of eco consciousness. So far, the target of slow tourism has been changed from the initial environmental awareness into realistic management, which benefits visitors’ sustainable experience, satisfaction, and well-being [33].

Despite the fact that slow tourism was inexplicitly defined, there was a general agreement on slow tourism’s benefits to both tourists and destinations. Tourists can obtain a more meaningful sustainable tourism experience, getting immersed in the destination and acting like a native, thus achieving a high level of satisfaction and well-being by eventually slowing down [24,25,28,33]. Slow tourism can satisfy tourists’ needs of contemporary life, well-being, and finding a true self by providing a relaxing place or creating an authentic local experience [34]. Visitors can easily identify the special characteristics of the locality and achieved a sense of attachment to the destination by slowing down [35]. For destinations, it goes one step further by providing an alternative development pattern from a more green and sustainable way. Slow tourism related to slow cities stresses the unique features and the sense of place and identity of destinations, in contrast to mere destination economic growth. In addition, the concept of “slow” and the “green value” attached to slow tourism can be used as a marketing and management strategy based on place characteristics to attract more tourists [25,36].
2.2. Destination Brand Experience

Experience is a core concept in tourism [37,38]. Tourists try to create valuable memories, arouse positive emotions, touch hearts, and inspire minds by seeking unforgettable experiences at tourism destinations [39]. The concept of tourist experience was complex and widely discussed from different perspectives, such as the views on psychology [40], economics [41], and stimulus–response [37]. One of the experience theories is “Experiential Marketing Theory”, which sees experience as an individual’s engagement with some stimuli at different levels, such as senses, feelings, emotions, minds, or actions [37]. Experience marketing theory emphasized that an individual’s experience can be created and managed. Then, according to the findings of Schmitt [37], Brakus et al. proposed an improved concept of Brand Experience [42]. They argued that the constructs of Brand Experience were composed of sensation, cognition, feeling, and behavioral response. Now, Experiential marketing has become a key theory in the marketing field, as it can be applied in different industries. From the tourism aspect, Barnes et al. explored a new measurement construct named destination brand experience (DBE) based on the constructs of Brand Experience [43]. In their study, the four constructs of destination brand experience were the same as the ones proposed by Brakus et al. [42]. Sensory experience is the most primary response stimulated by the environment and it refers to bodily experiences that can be triggered through sound, taste, smell, sight, and touch. Affective experience is the collection of emotion, sentiment, and feeling that can be stimulated by different levels of individuals’ intrinsic emotion (weak to strong) towards the destination brand. Intellectual experience includes curiosity, thinking experience, and cognitive thought. Visitors’ convergent and divergent thinking can be generated through designed environment or activities. Behavioral experience refers to physical behaviors and actions, providing an opportunity to interact with places and with an alternative lifestyle for visitors. Through involving emotions and senses, the induced unique or memorable experiences of individuals may impact their cognitive and conative attitudes toward specific objects [37,38]. Given this, the tourists’ existential authenticity and place attachment may be aroused and act as an emotional response to the experience process in the slow tourism destination.

Image, logo, advertisements, and so on are important internal or external characteristics of a brand. Because of these characteristics, there are obvious boundaries between product, content, and service suppliers [44]. In this context, slow tourism is a kind of destination brand in the slow city to some extent, because “slow” is a specific image attracting tourists [36]. The experience offered by slow city or slow destination involves all four dimensions of DBE. For instance, visitors’ sensory experiences can be triggered by natural sights, authentic environments, or special features. A slow city can create visitors’ sensory experiences as it is always located at a natural place isolated from metropolitan cities and offers a relaxed and peaceful environment. In addition, slow tourism will touch visitors with a stronger emotion. Tourists can feel positive emotions, such as enjoyment and happiness, as a result of this slower way of travelling. Slow tourism also offers an intellectual experience. Visitors can actively rethink the modern life and the meaning of time, and immerse themselves into a slower lifestyle in a slow city. Slow tourism offers behavioral experiences by encouraging tourists to connect with locals on a deeper level and providing chances for active participation in cultural activities. Although the DEB scale has been used in multiple studies [45–47], it has rarely been employed empirically in slow tourism-related destinations. Thus, based on DEB, the current study would utilize the multidimensional experience.

2.3. Existential Authenticity and its Significance against a Slow Tourism Background

Existential authenticity originated from philosophy and has received increasing attention in tourism academic research recently. Differently from the object-oriented conventional authenticity that consisted of constructive and objective authenticity, existential authenticity emphasized the experience of the subject [5,7]. Existential authenticity focuses on individuals’ psychological and emotional states, which describe a person’s true self and natural state [5,10–12]. Previous studies considered that existential authenticity can be produced or achieved when tourists search for a special experience through tourism or activities [7,10]. It emphasizes the experience state of tourists. Even if the tourist’s
aim is distorted, tourists can still seek the authenticity activated by tourism activities and special environment. Wang argued that existential authenticity is composed of intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity [7]. Intrapersonal authenticity focuses on the connection to the self. It mostly related to “bodily feeling” and “self-making” [7,9]. Bodily feeling means that tourists get rid of the physical constraints in daily work and life to activate the sensations of satisfaction, relaxation, and invigoration. Self-making refers to the process of the way one thinks about his or her characteristics (self-identity) and achieving as much as one can realize (self-realization). Interpersonal authenticity focuses on the connection to others. It depended on the interactions between tourists and others including families, friends, or even locals and strangers [7,9,48]. It is a social existence. Individuals can establish a more friendly, natural, and equal relationship in the context of tourism without being affected by original social status [9,48,49].

After the existential authenticity was proposed by Wang [7], it was used by a few empirical studies to interpret the experience of tourists [4,9,48–51]. However, recently, some argument also pointed out the over-generalization of existential authenticity. Not all tourism or experience can help attach a state of “true self”, since not all activity is extraordinary and liminal [9,50]. Certain tourism environments or tourist experiences, such as heritage-related experiences [9,48,49], volunteer tourism [5], pilgrimage experiences [51], or nature-based destinations [4], have been confirmed to have a close relationship with existential authenticity, as these environments and experiences could give a free chance to embrace and represent one’s true self. This study respects these critical debates and tries to avoid an over-generalization of the concept of existential authenticity. This study also argues that only certain tourism situations or deeper experiences can stimulate existential authenticity.

In prior studies, the characteristics of authenticity had been widely discussed in the context of slow tourism [24,28,30,52], but were usually approached from an object-related perspective. Studies have rarely explicitly linked existential authenticity to slow tourism, even though it is highly consistent with the principles of slow tourism. As mentioned above, existential authenticity is closely related to tourists bodily feelings, such as fun, relaxation, enjoyment, refreshment, sensual pleasures, and excitement. These feelings or sensations are considered by several researchers as the motivation of slow tourism [13,24,33]. The desire to “slow down” originated from individuals’ mental resistance to the negative effects of speed and modernity. Slow tourism offers an opportunity to relax, achieve stress relief, return to essence, and finally recover and sublimate one’s feelings. Given this, slow tourism is a pivotal approach to attain existential authenticity. Furthermore, existential authenticity explains visitors’ perceptions associated with self-identity, self-making, and self-realization [7,10], which is highly consistent with slow tourism’s goals to achieve self-reactivation and self-enhancement [33]. Additionally, the slower the tourists enjoy slow tourism, the more chance they will have to communicate with families, locals, or other tourists. In other words, slow tourists show more of the “authentic” not only to the self but also to the others.

2.4. Place Attachment

The study of the human–land relationship is an important field of sociological research that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Place attachment is a widely discussed concept that interprets the emotional man–land relationship and has seen rich theoretical construction and practical exploration from different perspectives, such as environmental psychology, human geography, and leisure tourism. Concepts related to place attachment also include sense of place, place bonding, community attachment, and so on. These concepts measure the intangible value of places. There seems to exist a certain consensus in current research regarding utilizing the concept of “place attachment” [53]. The current views hold that place attachment reflects one’s affective bonding or emotional connection with specific environments or places [16,53]. This concept plays a pivotal role in liking human beings and places through feelings (emotion, the most important segment), knowledge, beliefs, ideology (cognition), and behaviors (practice) [54]. Despite a sense of place aroused when individuals connect with a typical environment, an identity or attachment to the place is not a certainty; visitors are
immersed in the internal environment and generate a sense of belonging. Based on prior studies, place attachment is specified as an affective man–land relationship in a special environment or place, expressing a psychological state of feeling comfortable and safe, and a preference to stay at the specific place [16,53,54]. Controversy has long existed when it comes to the dimension classification of place attachment (e.g., two/three/four/five constructs). Most of the prior studies used place identity and place dependence as the dual dimensions of place attachment, which had been examined as a widely accepted approach against the research field of tourism and an environmental psychology background. As place dependence emphasizes the irreplaceability and unique qualities of a place that can meet visitors’ specific activities, it is a reflection of the man–land relationship’s functional content, including the evaluation of the social and physical resources, settings, or activities [54]. Additionally, another construct that is often used to represent place attachment is place identity. It delineates the strong emotional bond within the man–land relationship and interprets one’s self-identity that projects onto the physical environment [55,56].

Previous studies have mentioned that slow tourism is strongly linked with place attachment and a sense of place [27,32,35]. When individuals are involved in a specific place or environment that includes “slow” characteristics, they will attain attachment to the place [17]. Given this, slow tourism will provide an opportunity to achieve a deep experience, and then it would be easier for tourists to obtain a sense of attachment to a place. Specifically, tourists may enjoy and be attracted by “slow” theme tourism activities (such as traditional food experience or “slow” featured traffic experiences), immersing themselves in the experience process at a slow tourism destination [24,27,28,30]. In addition, one of the aims of slow tourism is to “live like a local”. This aim is consistent with the point of view that acting as the habitant contributes to attaining attachment to a specific place [15]. Despite the close connections between slow tourism and place attachment, few studies have empirically explored this against the slow tourism background.

2.5. Hypothesis Development

2.5.1. Destination Experience and Existential Authenticity

Authenticity can be generated by tourists through destination experience [57]. That is to say, visitors’ experiences in destination may influence the feelings about authenticity. Some evidence, although scattered in the qualitative literature, pointed to the influence of experience on existential authenticity. The tourist’s existential experiences are not created out of thin air. They need an “object or context” [2]. The object or stimulus, such as physical challenges and sensory stimulation, will help to achieve a state of existential authenticity [58]. Composed of sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences, destination brand experience (DBE) offers a comprehensive experience process aroused by stimulations. As mentioned above, sensory stimulation is closely related to existential authenticity [58]. Besides, emotions are pivotal in the experience process of state authenticity [59]. The motivation for chasing existential authenticity is closely related to the rethinking of modern life, which follows the concept of intellectual experience [7]. Intellectual experience challenges an individual to think freely. The behavioral experiences refer to actions that visitors engaged in during activities. Through these activities, tourists will arouse an authenticity state [7]—for example, through dance or extreme sports. Consequently, it is possible and reasonable to assume that destination brand experience can predict existential authenticity. Some studies also empirically examined the relationship between experience and existential authenticity. Rickly-Boyd [23] found that lifestyle aspects, such as a considerable amount of time spent in nature, can affect existential authenticity. In the empirical study of Lee, Chang and Luo, they argued that the recreation experience directly and validly impacts the perceived authenticity [60]. Due to the relationship discussed above, the hypotheses are developed as follows:
Hypothesis 1a,b,c,d: Intrapersonal authenticity is positively influenced by sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences.

Hypothesis 2a,b,c,d: Interpersonal authenticity is positively influenced by sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences.

2.5.2. Existential Authenticity and Place Attachment

It has been proven that place attachment is directly influenced by perceived authenticity [14]. Belhassen et al. argued that pilgrims are tied to the Holy Land under the influence of their perceived authenticity in these related places [61]. Debenedetti et al., taking commercial settings as cases, investigated what will influence the building of place attachment [18]. Results showed that authenticity can strengthen place attachment. Jiang et al. proposed that place attachment is directly impacted by existential authenticity, since existential authenticity achieves positive emotions [4], and further confirmed that existential authenticity can positively influence place attachment using a structural equation model against the natural tourism background. Although previous studies have pointed out that existential authenticity significantly influences place attachment, most of them see existential authenticity as a unidimensional construct. Sub-dimensions of existential authenticity have not been investigated with place attachment.

This study assumed that both intra- and inter-personal authenticity influence place attachment. As is mentioned above, intrapersonal authenticity focuses on bodily feeling (such as relaxation and enjoyment) or self-making, which are highly consistent with slow tourists’ preferences. At the same time, place dependence, as a sub-dimension of place attachment, can be achieved by satisfying some environmental preferences [62]. In this sense, tourists may achieve place dependence by obtaining intrapersonal authenticity in slow tourism settings. Besides, place identity, as another sub-dimension of place attachment, focuses on individuals being able to express and affirm their self-concept in their interactions with the place [63], while self-representation will be more freely obtained from intrapersonal authenticity [10]. Thus, intrapersonal authenticity may lead to a stronger place attachment (H3).

In addition, place dependence focuses on the evaluation of the social and physical resources, settings, or activities [54]. Tourists may become more receptive to resources, activities or programs available at the destination when tourists achieve interpersonal authenticity (getting closer to others) [7,10,49], thus helping them develop a deeper dependence toward the location. The dimension of interaction with others (interpersonal authenticity) would be likely to help the development of group identity, which has been linked with place identity [64,65]. Thus, interpersonal authenticity may influence place attachment (H4).

Due to the relationship discussed above, the following hypotheses were posited:

Hypothesis 3: Place attachment is positively influenced by intrapersonal authenticity.

Hypothesis 4: Place attachment is positively influenced by interpersonal authenticity.

2.5.3. Destination Experience and Place Attachment

The interactionist-based theory of place attachment posits that the experience of a setting, as well as past, current, and potential future interactions with the setting, lead to meaning development and ultimately attachment to that setting [17]. When people experience a destination brand, they may become attached to the destination due to an emotional meaning given to the destination [66]. That is to say, place attachment can be established after people engage in and experience an environment. Such experiences may positively affect their sense of identification and belonging to the attraction. A few literatures have examined the influence of destination brand experience on place attachment.
Beckman, Kumar, and Kim [67], using destination brand experience scales (DBEs), verified that sensory experience and affective experience have a significant effect on place dependence for tourists in a city’s downtown, while sensory experience and behavioral experience significantly influence place dependence for locals. In addition to the destination brand experience scale, other literatures also used the “4E experience” scale or memorable experience scale to demonstrate the relationship between tourists’ experience and place attachment. Suntikul and Jachna [68] explored the relationship between tourists’ “4E experience” (entertainment, education, aesthetic, and escapism) and place attachment (place dependence and place identity). Their study found strong correlations between esthetic experience and both dimensions of place attachment. The three other dimensions of visitor experience (entertainment, education, and escapism) correlate more strongly with place identity. Chen, Leask, and Phou [69] explored the influence of three destination consumptions (symbolic consumption, experiential consumption and functional consumption) on destination attachment, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty within a heritage context. Their study results revealed that experiential consumption has a significantly positive effect on destination attachment. Tsai [70] also pointed out that the memorable travel experiences of consuming local food enhance visitors’ strong attachment to local attractions.

Due to the relationship discussed above, the following hypotheses were posited:

**Hypothesis 5a,b,c,d:** Place attachment is positively influenced by sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences.

### 2.5.4. The Mediating Role of Existential Authenticity

As discussed above, existential authenticity has become a key psychological construct for explaining tourists’ experience and place attachment in the tourism field. In investigating the relationship between experience marketing stimulation and marketing outcomes, consumer psychology is often operationalized as a key intervening construct [71–73]. In this study, destination brand experience can be seen as stimulation, and place attachment can be considered as a marketing outcome. Previous studies support the role of customer perceptions as a mediator between marketing stimulation and marketing outcomes. For example, Jiang et al. found that existential authenticity can mediate the relationship of destination image with place dependence and place identity [4]. Yi et al. argued that the indirect effect of tourists’ perception of architectural heritage and folk culture on destination loyalty through existential authenticity was supported by significant mediation in the context of heritage tourism [48]. The result of Chien-Hsin et al. exhibited that perceived value partially mediates the effect of tourist experience on satisfaction [74]. Based on the pre-existing studies, it can be hypothesized that existential authenticity will mediate the relationship of destination brand experience with place attachment. Therefore, the following hypotheses were posited:

**Hypothesis 6a,b,c,d:** Intrapersonal authenticity mediates the relationship between destination brand experience (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences) and place attachment.

**Hypothesis 6e,f,g,h:** Interpersonal authenticity mediates the relationship between destination brand experience (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences) and place attachment.

Therefore, the concept model is proposed based on the above discussions of research hypotheses (see Figure 1).
3. Methodology

3.1. Case Description

In the context of slow tourism, a specific space is usually required as a carrier, such as a slow tourism destination, to satisfy visitors’ needs for deep integration with local people and culture [24]. A slow city is a representative example of the slow concept actively accepted and practiced in a certain area or space. Slow cities emphasize the distinctive features and sustainable development of the place. The slow city movement advocates to find the cities’ own identity and soul. As the core feature of a slow city, “Slower for a better life” not only realizes the good wishes of urban residents to pursue quality of life but also conforms to the reality that tourists seek to have a slow rhythm of life. Recently, Slow City has become an identified destination brand for visitors as the trend is shifting to searching for high quality experiences, eco-friendly lifestyles and well-being [13].

The first slow city in China is the beginning of slow tourism. In November, 2010, Yaxi town (Nanjing City, China) was certified by Cittaslow International as the first international Cittaslow Town in China. After that, there has been more and more news about slow cities and tourism, which has attracted the attention of mass media by degrees. Hence, this study chooses the initial Cittaslow Town Yaxi in Nanjing to be the typical object of this case study, where Chinese tourists enjoy their rural tourism with the “slow” theme.

3.2. Measures for Study Variables

There are three main variables in this study that composed the questionnaire. In the section of tourist destination experience, four dimensions (sensory, intellectual, affective, and behavioral experience) proposed by Brakus et al. and Barnes et al. were adopted, and each dimension corresponded to three items [42,43]. To measure existential authenticity, six items with two dimensions (intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity) were adopted from previous studies, including: Jiang et al. [4]; Wang [7]; Yi et al. [48]; and Yi et al. [49]. In the section of place attachment, place identity and place dependence were measured by four items adopted from previous research [54,55]. Note that all the items in the above three sections (as shown in Table 2) used a 7-point Likert scale, the number one indicated strongly disagree, and the number seven indicated strongly agree.
3.3. Sampling Methods

A pilot investigation was carried out in May 2018 before the formal investigation to assure the sampling validity. The questionnaire was revised according to respondents’ comments on the length, understanding, and clearness of the sentences. To further improve the expression of the items to maintain specialization and be explicit for respondents, this study also appealed to professors who majored in tourism management from Paichai University and Henan University (two professors each). After finishing the revision process from the pilot respondents and professors, in September 2018 the formal investigation was carried out at Yaxi town. This study adopted the convenient sampling method to avoid the general investigation of all people, which had been widely accepted by researchers in the field of consumer behavior and marketing. Due to the notions of slow city and tourism being relatively strange to the Chinese public, a brief description of these two concepts was firstly presented in the questionnaire. This study chose the visitors who had slow tourism experiences (e.g., farming experience-related activities; experience of traditional food; slow-paced rhythm; and preferring to find local characteristics) as the target respondents to insure the validity of the research. The interviewers stated the purpose of the investigation, and the participants were informed in advance that they would receive a small gift for taking part in the survey. In total, 463 questionnaires were collected. Finally, 398 questionnaires were retained for analysis after removing incomplete responses and extreme numbers. In general, a sample size of at least 200 participants or ten times the overall indicators (in Likert-scale style) was required for a model when conducting structural equation modeling (SEM) [75,76]. In this study, 398 (>200) questionnaires were used in the analysis and with 26 overall indicators (398 > 26 × 10 = 260). The sample size is sufficient for subsequent data analysis. Collected data were analyzed by the SPSS program and AMOS 24.0.

In the section of respondents’ demographic characteristics, 55.1% were male, and 44.9% were female. With a regard to age, most respondents were aged between 20–29 (57.3%), followed by 30–39 (24.3%). In the level of education, most of the respondents had a higher education background (college 24.3% and university 50.9%). More than 80% of respondents (81.3%) were likely to travel in an independent tour. The results were consistent with prior studies that tourists with an advanced degree or a low average age accounted for the vast majority of tourists in slow tourism [28,33]. The possible explanation could be attributed to the “slow and free from the fast-paced life” characteristic of slow tourism destinations, which satisfies the needs of such groups to get away from the faster status quo. On the other hand, the tourists who choose a slower mode always want to immerse themselves in the host culture and local environments, which requires them to be more independent and flexible in planning their trips [26], and individuals with a low average age could be the suitable group.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model: First-Order CFA

The normality assumption was applied to examine whether the study had a multivariate non-normal distribution. In the current study, the absolute value of all the items’ skewness (<3) and kurtosis (<10) were in accordance with the recommended cut-off criteria [77]. However, the multivariate kurtosis was higher than five, indicating that the normality assumption was violated in this study [78]. When dealing with the non-normal distribution issue in SEM, Hancock and Liu argued that the bootstrap method in AMOS could satisfy the normality assumption through developing a reasonable standard error (SE) in bootstrap maximum likelihood and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the estimation process [79]. The bootstrap method provides enough resampling for the indicator paths to be fixed to ensure the standard errors would not be inflated [80]. Therefore, the measurement model and structural model will be estimated and examined by following the guidelines of the bootstrap method [78,79,81].

Generally, it is necessary to use higher-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) when the measurement model contains higher-order factor structures (multidimensional concepts), especially
when the first-order factors (within the high-order concept) have high correlations [82]. Additionally, an explicit first-order measurement model is still necessary before the higher-order SEM [83]. As discussed in the literature review, brand experience, existential authenticity, and place attachment are all multidimensional concepts. High correlations existed between place dependence and place identity (the first-order factors of place attachment, see in Table 2). Therefore, a first-order measurement model on all dimensions was estimated at first. Then, the second-order measurement model and structural model were performed to simplify the model structure.

Based on the fitness indices [84], the results in the current study indicate a good fit with $\chi^2$ (chi-square) = 693.628 ($p < 0.05$), df = 271, $\chi^2$/df = 2.560 (< 3), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.943 (> 0.9), normed-fit index (NFI) = 0.910 (> 0.9), non-normed-fit index (NNFI) = 0.931 (> 0.9), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.063 (< 0.08), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.043 (< 0.05). Specifically, as shown in Table 2, except for the third indicator of place identity, all factor loadings of the items in the measurement model were above the cutoff criteria 0.7 (ranging from 0.705 to 0.911), showing a good item validity. For the internal consistency, each construct had the appropriate level of reliability due to the values of composite reliability were all being larger than the recommended minimum criteria of 0.7. Additionally, the convergent validity was examined by the average variance extracted (AVE) of all the constructs as they were above the cutoff value 0.5 (ranging from 0.556 to 0.732) (seen in Table 1).

Table 1. The discriminant validity.

| Constructs | SE | AFF | INT | BEH | EA1 | EA2 | PD | PI |
|------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|
| SE         | 0.732 | 0.598 | 0.457 | 0.391 | 0.444 | 0.482 | 0.364 | 0.364 |
| AFF        | 0.051 | 0.696 | 0.424 | 0.402 | 0.529 | 0.484 | 0.424 | 0.386 |
| INT        | 0.048 | 0.05 | 0.723 | 0.508 | 0.919 | 0.543 | 0.434 | 0.417 | 0.426 |
| BEH        | 0.052 | 0.045 | 0.043 | 0.678 | 0.648 | 0.530 | 0.576 | 0.539 |
| EA1        | 0.049 | 0.040 | 0.042 | 0.041 | 0.614 | 0.719 | 0.651 | 0.604 |
| EA2        | 0.044 | 0.044 | 0.051 | 0.043 | 0.038 | 0.646 | 0.569 | 0.531 |
| PD         | 0.059 | 0.044 | 0.048 | 0.039 | 0.037 | 0.043 | 0.556 | 0.726* |
| PI         | 0.054 | 0.044 | 0.044 | 0.044 | 0.039 | 0.030 | 0.030 | 0.638 |

Note. SE = Sensory; AFF = Affective; INT = Intellectual; BEH = Behavioral; EA1 = Intrapersonal Authenticity; EA2 = Interpersonal Authenticity; PD = Place Dependence; PI = Place Identity; (a) *: the highest correlation coefficient among constructs; (b) the average variance extracted (AVE) values were on the diagonal; (c) the squared correlations of the inter-construct were below the diagonal; (d) the values in parentheses mean the correlation between each construct; (e) the standard errors between each construct were below the diagonal (estimated by the bootstrapping maximum likelihood approach with 10,000 resamples in AMOS).

It was suggested that the acceptable discriminant validity meant the squared correlations between each construct should below their AVE [85]. However, the squared correlations between behavioral experience (BEH) and intrapersonal authenticity (EA1) (0.648), intrapersonal authenticity (EA1) and interpersonal authenticity (EA2) (0.719), behavioral experience (BEH) and place dependence (PD) (0.576), intrapersonal authenticity (EA1) and place dependence (PD) (0.651), interpersonal authenticity (EA2) and place dependence (PD) (0.569), and between place dependence (PD) and place identity (PI) (0.726) in this study were found to be higher than the corresponding construct’s AVE value (EA1 =0.614, EA2= 0.646, PD = 0.556, and PI = 0.638). Thus, the confidence interval method was used to ensure the discriminant validity. The confidence interval of each construct was calculated through minus or plus twice the correlations’ standard errors. Then, the discriminant validity will be affirmed if the confidence interval does not contain 1.0 [86]. In this study, the confidence interval of correlations (correlation coefficient ± 2× standard error) between BEH and EA1 (0.805 ± 2 × 0.041 = 0.877, 0.723);
EA1 and EA2 (0.848 ± 2 × 0.038 = 0.924, 0.772); BEH and PD (0.759 ± 2 × 0.039 = 0.837, 0.681); EA1 and PD (0.807 ± 2 × 0.037 = 0.881, 0.733); EA2 and PD (0.754 ± 2 × 0.043 = 0.840, 0.668); and PD and PI (0.852 ± 2 × 0.030 = 0.912, 0.792) did not include the cutoff criterion 1.0, indicating a tenable discriminant validity.

### Table 2. Results of measurement model.

| Constructs/Indicators | Factor Loading | SE Boot | SMC |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------|-----|
| **Sensory (SE)**      |                |         |     |
| Yaxi is designed for its sensory appeal | 0.773 | 0.095 | 0.598 |
| Yaxi appeals to engage my senses | 0.911 | 0.034 | 0.830 |
| Yaxi is tranquility in my sense | 0.876 | - | 0.767 |
| **Affective (AFF)**   |                |         |     |
| Yaxi tries to appeal to slowness feelings | 0.821 | 0.050 | 0.674 |
| Yaxi tries to put me in certain feelings | 0.852 | 0.081 | 0.726 |
| Yaxi makes me feel differentiated | 0.830 | - | 0.689 |
| **Intellectual (INT)**|                |         |     |
| Yaxi stimulates me to think about slow life | 0.832 | 0.092 | 0.692 |
| Traveling in Yaxi reminds me of the lifestyle I want | 0.893 | 0.080 | 0.798 |
| Yaxi stimulates my rethinking about time or life | 0.825 | - | 0.680 |
| **Behavioral (BEH)**  |                |         |     |
| I would buy some souvenirs which are related to Yaxi | 0.802 | 0.072 | 0.643 |
| I would like to take pictures at Yaxi as mementos | 0.852 | 0.068 | 0.726 |
| I would like to participate in various activities in Yaxi | 0.815 | - | 0.664 |
| **Intrapersonal Authenticity (EA1)** | | | |
| I am able to discover more about myself in this atmosphere at Yaxi | 0.762 | 0.069 | 0.580 |
| I become more self and subjective in its own right at Yaxi | 0.788 | 0.058 | 0.622 |
| I am immersing myself in this slow atmosphere and enjoy it | 0.800 | - | 0.641 |
| **Interpersonal Authenticity (EA2)** | | | |
| I can contact with local people in a natural, authentic, and friendly way | 0.802 | 0.064 | 0.643 |
| I quite agree with the lifestyle of Yaxi people | 0.823 | 0.056 | 0.677 |
| I am willing to contact with others in a natural, authentic, and friendly way | 0.786 | - | 0.618 |
| **Place Dependence (PD)** | | | |
| I enjoy visiting yaxi and its environment is good | 0.705 | 0.056 | 0.497 |
| Yaxi is a distinctiveness place to enjoy slow life | 0.781 | 0.064 | 0.610 |
| I like the settings and facilities provided by this destination very much | 0.741 | 0.056 | 0.549 |
| I want to stay here more than at other destinations | 0.753 | - | 0.566 |
| **Place Identity (PI)** | | | |
| Visiting this destination says a lot about who I am | 0.809 | 0.149 | 0.655 |
| There is congruence between this destination and my self-identity | 0.860 | 0.135 | 0.740 |
| At Yaxi, I could do more of what I liked | 0.835 | 0.140 | 0.698 |
| It is a good memory to visit this destination | 0.679 | - | 0.461 |

Note: SE Boot: the standardized errors (SE) were estimated by the bootstrapping maximum likelihood approach with 10,000 resamples in AMOS; the factor loadings of all indicators were significant (p < 0.001) as determined by the two-tailed 95% bias-corrected percentile method [87]; SMC = squared multiple correlation.

### 4.2. Measurement Model: Second-Order CFA

The second-order measurement model was conducted to examine the construct validity of the second-order factors. As discussed above (in 4.1), this study treats place attachment as a higher-order construct comprising two first-order factors, including place dependence and place identity, to mitigate potential multicollinearity and to lessen model complexity, which can improve the model’s goodness-of-fit and predictive validity. The measurement model achieved a good fit for the sample data, with $\chi^2$ (chi-square) = 695.172 (p < 0.05), df = 276, $\chi^2$/df = 2.519 (< 3), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.943 (>0.9), normed-fit index (NFI) = 0.910 (>0.9), non-normed-fit index (NNFI) = 0.933 (>0.9), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062 (<0.08), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.044 (<0.05), indicating that the second-order factor was well measured by the first-order factors. As shown in Table 3, the factor loadings of two dimensions of place attachment were all significant. Furthermore, the AVE value of place attachment (PA) was 0.852, well exceeding 0.5, supporting convergent validity.
Table 3. Second-order measurement model for place attachment.

| 2nd-order Constructs / Indicators | Factor Loading | SE Boot | SMC   | AVE | CR  |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------|-------|-----|-----|
| Place Attachment (PA)            | 0.852          |         | 0.820 |     |     |
| Place Dependence (PD)            | 0.937          | -       | 0.878 |     |     |
| Place Identity (PI)              | 0.909          | 0.081   | 0.826 |     |     |

Note: SE Boot: the standardized errors (SE) were estimated by the bootstrapping maximum likelihood approach with 10,000 resamples in AMOS; the factor loadings of all indicators were significant ($p < 0.001$) as determined by the two-tailed 95% bias-corrected percentile method [87]; SMC = squared multiple correlation.

4.3. Structural Model and Hypotheses Test

The validity of the structural model was examined with the bootstrapping maximum likelihood approach through the fitness between the collected samples and the relationships between SE, AFF, INT, BEH, EA1, EA2, and PA. The fitness indices of the structural model were as follows: $\chi^2$ (chi-square) = 732.895 ($p < 0.05$), $df = 277$, $\chi^2/df = 2.646$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.938, normed-fit index (NFI) = 0.905, non-normed-fit index (NNFI) = 0.927, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.064, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.046, showing that an acceptable fitness between the collected data and structural model was achieved. The structural model with path estimates was shown in Figure 2. As shown in Table 4, seven hypotheses were supported, whereas H1a, H1c, H2a, H2c, H5a, H5b, and H5c were not. In relations between destination brand experience and existential authenticity, affective experience (AFF) and behavioral experience (BEH) significantly predicted intrapersonal authenticity (EA1) ($\beta_{AFF\rightarrow EA1} = 0.306$, SE Boot = 0.154, $p < 0.05$; $\beta_{BEH\rightarrow EA1} = 0.510$, SE Boot = 0.113, $p < 0.001$). Affective experience and behavioral experience significantly predicted interpersonal authenticity (EA2) ($\beta_{AFF\rightarrow EA2} = 0.246$, SE Boot = 0.158, $p < 0.05$; $\beta_{BEH\rightarrow EA2} = 0.435$, SE Boot = 0.124, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the hypotheses test examined and supported H1b, H1d, H2b and H2d. However, sensory experience was not significant in predicting both of Intrapersonal Authenticity (EA1) and Interpersonal Authenticity (EA2). Furthermore, intellectual experience insignificantly impacted both of Intrapersonal Authenticity (EA1) and Interpersonal Authenticity (EA2), indicating that hypotheses H1a, H1c, H2a, and H2c were rejected. In short, tourists’ affective experience, emotions, feelings, and behavioral experience showed a significant contribution to the two dimensions of existential authenticity. This finding indicates that not all types of destination experience are significant to tourists’ emotions. The response to the destination experience by tourists varies from situation to situation. This is in line with the finding of Song et al. [88]. In the relationship between existential authenticity and place attachment, intrapersonal authenticity (EA1) and interpersonal authenticity (EA2) were examined to directly predict place attachment (PA). Specifically, intrapersonal authenticity has a significant effect on place attachment ($\beta_{EA1\rightarrow PA} = 0.369$, SE Boot = 0.155, $p < 0.05$), supporting H3; and interpersonal authenticity significantly influenced place attachment ($\beta_{EA2\rightarrow PA} = 0.254$, SE Boot = 0.112, $p < 0.05$), supporting H4. In short, two dimensions of existential authenticity significantly influenced place attachment. It is consistent with the study of Jiang et al. [4] that found that the self-state of tourists could significantly affect their perception and identification of the destination. In the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment, only behavioral experience had a direct and significant influence on place attachment ($\beta_{BEH\rightarrow PA} = 0.263$, SE Boot = 0.125, $p < 0.05$), supporting H5d, while sensory experience, affective experience and intellectual experience did not show a significant effect on place attachment, indicating that hypotheses H5a, H5b, and H5c were rejected. It is consistent with the suggestion of Beckman et al. [67] that some subdimensions of brand experience could significantly influence place dependence.
Figure 2. The final structural model. Note: bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples; $\chi^2(311) = 695.172$ ($p < 0.05$), chi-square/degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df$) = 2.519, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.943, non-normed-fit index (NNFI) = 0.933, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, and * $p < 0.05$ (95% bias-corrected percentile method); PD and PI are the 1st-order factors, which acted as indicators of place attachment (the 2nd-order factor).

Table 4. Hypotheses test.

| Hypotheses | SE → EA1 | Estimate | SE Boot | Results |
|-------------|----------|----------|---------|---------|
| H1          |          |          |         |         |
| H1a         |          | 0.006    | 0.165   | Rejected |
| H1b         | AFF → EA1 | 0.306*   | 0.154   | Accepted |
| H1c         | INT → EA1 | 0.178    | 0.106   | Rejected |
| H1d         | BEH → EA1 | 0.510*** | 0.113   | Accepted |
| H2          |          |          |         |         |
| H2a         | SE → EA2 | 0.184    | 0.172   | Rejected |
| H2b         | AFF → EA2 | 0.246*   | 0.158   | Accepted |
| H2c         | INT → EA2 | 0.070    | 0.137   | Rejected |
| H2d         | BEH → EA2 | 0.435**  | 0.124   | Accepted |
| H3          |          |          |         |         |
| H3          | EA1 → PA | 0.369*   | 0.155   | Accepted |
| H4          | EA2 → PA | 0.254*   | 0.112   | Accepted |
| H5          |          |          |         |         |
| H5a         | SE → PA  | 0.003    | 0.241   | Rejected |
| H5b         | AFF → PA | 0.041    | 0.231   | Rejected |
| H5c         | INT → PA | 0.050    | 0.098   | Rejected |
| H5d         | BEH → PA | 0.263*   | 0.125   | Accepted |

Mediation Hypotheses

| Hypotheses | Estimate | SE Boot | LLCI | ULCI | Results |
|-------------|----------|---------|------|------|---------|
| H6a         | SE → EA1 → PA | 0.002 | 0.167 | -0.112 | 0.088 | Rejected |
| H6b         | AFF → EA1 → PA | 0.113* | 0.188 | 0.021 | 0.275 | Accepted |
| H6c         | INT → EA1 → PA | 0.0866 | 0.059 | -0.002 | 0.210 | Rejected |
| H6d         | BEH → EA1 → PA | 0.189** | 0.097 | 0.065 | 0.447 | Accepted |
| H6e         | SE → EA2 → PA | 0.047 | 0.117 | -0.011 | 0.156 | Rejected |
| H6f         | AFF → EA2 → PA | 0.062* | 0.092 | 0.004 | 0.183 | Accepted |
| H6g         | INT → EA2 → PA | 0.018 | 0.041 | -0.040 | 0.120 | Rejected |
| H6h         | BEH → EA2 → PA | 0.110** | 0.059 | 0.028 | 0.269 | Accepted |

Note. SE = Sensory; AFF = Affective; INT = Intellectual; BEH = Behavioral; EA1 = Intrapersonal Authenticity; EA2 = Interpersonal Authenticity; PD = Place Dependence; PI = Place Identity; Estimate: the standardized values; SE Boot: the standardized errors (SE) were estimated by the bootstrapping maximum likelihood approach with 10,000 resamples in AMOS; $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$, and $p^{***} < 0.001$, the significance values were determined by the two-tailed 95% bias-corrected percentile method.

4.4. Testing for Indirect Effects of Existential Authenticity

In order to further explore the role of existential authenticity in destination brand experience and place attachment, this study used indirect analyses to examine the indirect effect of existential authenticity on the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment. Following the mediation analysis approach suggested by Zhao et al. [89], the indirect effect was examined utilizing AMOS with 10,000 bootstrapping resamples and the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval.
The results are shown in Table 4. The significant indirect effects of affective experience on place attachment were verified by intrapersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.113$, 95% CI = 0.021 to 0.275, $p < 0.05$) and interpersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.062$, 95% CI = 0.004 to 0.183, $p < 0.05$), since the 95% CI did not straddle zero, supporting hypotheses H6b and H6f, respectively. Then, the significant indirect effects of behavioral experience on place attachment were verified by intrapersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.189$, 95% CI = 0.065 to 0.447, $p < 0.05$) and interpersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.110$, 95% CI = 0.028 to 0.269, $p < 0.01$), since confidence intervals did not contain zero, supporting the H6d and H6h hypotheses, respectively. As the direct effect of affective experience on place attachment (H5b) was not significant, the indirect effects of H6b and H6f were both complete mediations. Additionally, as the direct effect of behavioral experience on place attachment was significant (H5d), the indirect effects of H6d and H6h were both partial mediations. Finally, since some dimensions of experience (sensory experience and intellectual experience) did not show significant influence on existential authenticity, some indirect effects were also insignificant. Specifically, the indirect effects of sensory experience on place attachment through intrapersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.002$, SE Boot = 0.167, 95% CI = −0.112 to 0.088) and interpersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.047$, SE Boot = 0.117, 95% CI = −0.011 to 0.156) were not significant, providing rejection for hypotheses H6a and H6e, respectively. The indirect effects of intellectual experience on place attachment through intrapersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.066$, SE Boot = 0.059, 95% CI = −0.002 to 0.210) and interpersonal authenticity ($\beta = 0.018$, SE Boot = 0.041, 95% CI = −0.040 to 0.120) were also insignificant, providing rejection for hypotheses H6c and H6g, respectively. These findings indicated that tourists’ perceptions of existential authenticity not only have a direct positive effect on place attachment, but also act as the mediator in the relationship between tourists’ affective experience and behavioral experience on place attachment. These findings further prove that existential authenticity is a construct derived from emotion and cognition.

5. Contributions and Implications

Existential authenticity has become a key concept in leisure tourism. It can be seen as an important motivation for tourists. However, recent literature also suggested that existential authenticity requires a special setting to trigger it. Slow tourism in this study provides one possible occasion for existential authenticity to occur. This study chose Yaxi town, the first international slow city in China, as the research site, to explore how tourists achieve existential authenticity and are eventually attached to the destination. Taking experience as the logical starting point, the current study examines the connections between tourists’ authenticity, experience, and place attachment and the mediating effect of existential authenticity on the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment. The conclusions contribute to a better understanding of tourists’ psychology and human–land connection. Finally, the conclusions will help us try to answer practical questions about how to effectively use the destination experience to carry out destination marketing and make the destination more attractive by achieving existential authenticity.

The current study emphasizes the significance of visitors’ experiences and existential authenticity during slow tourism and how their existential authenticity relates to increasing visitors’ place attachment. The empirical results showed that half of the research hypotheses were supported. Specifically, tourists’ affective experience and behavioral experience show a significant contribution to the two dimensions of existential authenticity, supporting hypotheses H1b, H1d, H2b, and H2d. Additionally, two dimensions of existential authenticity all significantly influence place attachment, supporting hypotheses H3 and H4a. Additionally, behavioral experience has a direct and significant influence on place attachment, supporting hypothesis H5d. In relation to the indirect effect of existential authenticity, the relationships between affective experience, behavioral experience, and place attachment were significantly mediated by intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity, supporting hypotheses H6b, H6d, H6h, and H6f.
5.1. Theoretical Contributions

First of all, this study explored the assumed relatedness among the tourists’ experience, place attachment, and existential authenticity from the oriental perspective against the slow tourism background. The findings were empirically consistent with prior studies that found slow tourism to be highly related to destination experience and place attachment [24–26,31,32]. In particular, the current study tried to understand how and why tourists achieved existential authenticity and later triggered emotional linkages to the tourism destination with slow characteristics through the slow tourism experience. Respecting the critical debates [9,21,50], the current study complemented the evidence from the slow tourism market, while previous studies focused more on heritage tourism [50]. The study findings suggested that existential authenticity, representing the tie to an experience-generating place, is an important construct for understanding the visitors’ attachment to the place. This study showed that the existential authenticity is not only a personal outcome, but can be linked with place or destination, such as place attachment. The findings extended the boundaries of the relationship between individuals and the environment.

Secondly, the findings examined the relationship between tourists’ experience and existential authenticity with experience as the predictor. The results exhibit that destination experience partially effect existential authenticity. These results support the conclusion of Barnes et al. [43] that not every dimension of DBEs would be significant in each destination. That is to say, different experience would be created depending on the type of destination or tour activity. For example, sensory experience can be mainly created at a nature-based tour/destination or in the context of food tourism, while a behavioral experience may be triggered at a tourism destination famous for sports. In the study of Barnes et al. [43], senses experience was confirmed to drive tourists’ experience outcomes, e.g., satisfaction and behavioral intention, in most cases. However, affective experience did not always trigger visitor outcomes. In that study, tourists’ affective experience could be triggered at the destination with a higher level of culture and arts. Similarly, Song et al. [88] found that sense experience, act experience, and related experiences have a significant influence on tourists’ emotions at the Expo 2012 in Yeosu, Korea. This study was consistent with previous studies’ opinion that different types of destination experiences have different priorities. As for slow tourism, it is a form that provided active experience and tourists will rediscover the spirit of travel and search for emotional experience by slowing down. Additionally, tourists who are keen on slow tourism are usually active in interacting with local people and places. Consequently, affective and behavioral experience can obviously be predictors of intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity against the slow tourism background. While intellectual experience is mostly related to one self’s cognitive thinking, it may have a closer relationship with intrapersonal authenticity. This study further demonstrates that existential authenticity is a construct based on emotion and cognition.

Thirdly, this study extended the reach of studies in an existentialist perspective. Existential authenticity was mainly related to two constructs (intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity [7]. However, this had rarely been verified by empirical study. This research further confirmed the opinion of Wang [7] and supported the studies of Yi et al. [49] and Fu [9] by examining the formation of existential authenticity through the dual constructs of interpersonal authenticity and intrapersonal authenticity. On the whole, the findings could be seen as a response to the calls for better recognizing slow tourism and tourists through the exploration of how tourists’ slow tourism experiences impact their existential authenticity and place attachment.

Fourthly, this study examined the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment. The results showed that only one subdimension of brand experience (behavioral experience) showed a significant effect on place attachment in this study. This finding is consistent with the suggestion of Beckman et al. that not all brand experience could be a significant predictor for place dependence [67]. We speculate that this result may be related to the specific context of slow tourism of this study. The desire to have a “slow experience” is originated from individuals’ mental resistance to the negative effects of speed and modernity. Additionally, the goals of slow tourists are revitalization
and self-enrichment [33]. These reflect the sense of self-alienation of tourists. Consequently, achieving existential authenticity can be seen as a condition for tourists to generate an emotional identity for the destination. In this sense, it is reasonable to speculate that existential authenticity acts as a mediator effect between destination brand experience and place attachment. This may explain why there was no direct causal relationship between most of dimensions of brand experience and place attachment.

Fifthly, although prior studies explored the mediating role of unidimensional existential authenticity [4,48], little attention has been paid to the indirect effects of existential authenticity as a multidimensional construct on the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment. In this study, the findings filled the research gaps that existential authenticity can mediate the relationship between destination brand experience and place attachment. More specifically, destination brand experience in slow tourism destinations cannot directly contribute to tourists’ place attachment, but it could be achieved through the indirect effect of existential authenticity. However, the results showed that only two subdimensions (affective and behavioral) of destination brand experience can indirectly influence place attachment through existential authenticity in the context of slow tourism. One possible explanation is that the slow destination experience that tourists expect is more focused on tourists’ emotion and the interaction effect with the local [26,27]. Additionally, existential authenticity is essentially a construct with more emotional content [48]. In other words, it is more related to affective experience and behavioral experience. When it comes to sensory experience and intellectual experience, they are more generally generated in the context of general tourism or heritage tourism destinations. Thus, their influences on place attachment may be limited.

Finally, in prior studies, existential authenticity was always used to predict the behavior of tourists, such as loyalty [2,48,49]; however, the current study confirmed that the concept of existential authenticity can not only be used to predict behavior, but emotions as well (place attachment). The results were consistent with the findings suggested by Jiang et al. [4], that place attachment could be positively impacted by existential authenticity. Furthermore, the findings of the relationships between interpersonal authenticity, intrapersonal authenticity, and place attachment had also contributed to understanding the tourists’ psychology. The results showed that both intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity could be predictors to place attachment, while interpersonal authenticity seldom received attention.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Based on the findings, some practical implications can be generated. Tourists’ pursuit of existence authenticity is a search for the freedom to be themselves [9]. This quest is suggested to be implemented in a specific tourism context such as pilgrimage, heritage tourism, or volunteer tourism. This study proposed that slow tourism is particularly relevant to existential authenticity. Existential authenticity can be seen as a market segmentation and have a strong attraction for tourists, and especially for slow tourists. Understanding the antecedents and consequences of existential authenticity carries specific implications for destination marketing and management.

To begin with, the findings provide evidence on how lifestyle tourism (e.g., slow life experience) can be considered a good practice within proving the sustainable experience of tourists and the sustainability of a destination. For instance, the specific brand experiences in slow destinations can provoke positive emotions that result in an attachment to the place that contributes to ensure the supportive behavior for the destination. In this sense, destination managers can make changes on the supply side to inspire local sustainability. The local managers should put the phenomenon of slow life experience into the context of the recent changes in the consumer demand. The sustainability of the destination is pivotal in the process of developing strategies. This is because the current tourists need a more human and environmentally friendly living place when they travel.

Secondly, this study provides a basis for the formulation of supply policies for tourism destinations. Experiential marketing tactics can be considered in the tourism market by destination managers. This study indicates that tourists’ experiences are highly related to their perceived authenticity,
especially highlighting the role of affective (emotional) experiences in their tour states. Destination managers can utilize various marketing strategies to attract more high-quality tourists. They can also try to stimulate various experiences according to different dimensions of destination experience. For example, the destination can provide some projects that enhance the emotional experience. This study provides a better understanding about how different experiences in slow tourism destinations contribute to existential authenticity that influence tourists’ place attachment. Therefore, destination marketers can properly manage and create destination experiences to influence visitors to achieve a state of existential authenticity. Experiential marketing can fully mobilize tourists’ senses, emotions, thoughts, and actions by allowing them to see, hear, and participate. It can then help tourists internalize the experience as an organic part of themselves, reshape people’s life attitudes and lifestyles, and establish a special emotion and identity for the place. When conducting destination marketing, we can emphasize that the environment and atmosphere there is conducive to spiritual recovery or good feelings for tourists. Destination managers should allocate resources and funds to stimulate pleasant experiences and help visitors get an authentic experience.

Thirdly, for destination organizers, the importance of tourists’ existential authenticity should be attached to developing the man–land emotional relationship, because a deeper emotional and functional attachment to the tourism destination could be triggered through definite existential authenticity. The current study confirms that intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity can positively impact place attachment. In this context, the rich emotion and personal thinking experience in the tourism destination will benefit tourists to get in touch with intrapersonal authenticity. Therefore, tourism destinations should provide products that develop emotional experiences or an atmosphere for thinking. Furthermore, the findings suggest that interpersonal authenticity is pivotal in explaining place attachment. This indicates that in addition to the self-authentic experience of tourists, people’s authentic communication experience should also be emphasized in tourism activities. The tourism practitioners should not only provide standardized services, but also be warm to visitors and communicate with them. Finally, the research findings also indicate the significant role of tourists’ existential authenticity in marketing. In this study, although most of the subdimensions of the destination brand experience cannot directly affect place attachment, the indirect influence could be eventually achieved through the guiding of existential authenticity (intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity). Thus, for decision makers and organizers, the direct and indirect roles of these constructs are necessary to practice in managing the influence of tourists’ attitudes and emotions toward slow tourism. More attention should be paid to the ways that can influence tourists’ psychology and emotions when marketing or managing a destination. Destination organizers should try their best to develop a better tourism experience through authentic tourists to enhance destinations’ reputations. This can attract more visitors who pay more attention to their own spirit. Therefore, it will increase the purchase desire of the potential tourists by showing them the sustainable and authentic features of the destinations.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

The current study still has some limitations that can be regarded as opportunities for subsequent research. Firstly, considering the specific context of slow tourism destinations in current research, despite the fact that the discussion of existential authenticity needs a certain situation or specific environment and slow tourism is highly related to the existential authenticity, the exploration of the model can be expanded to other leisure or tourism contexts such as culture heritage tourism or nature-based tourism. Future study should validate results across different types of destinations, events, or festivals to assess the generalizability of the model. Secondly, the sampling was only conducted in one destination, Yaxi town, which seems not to be enough for interpreting the development of slow tourism in China. Slow tourism and slow destination developed rapidly in China. There are nine international slow cities in mainland China that involve different types of cultural and natural destinations. In future study, a more comprehensive sample can be collected from diverse regions at multiple time points to ensure external validity and more general findings. Furthermore, the
The proposed model could be explored in a Western context in order to obtain a more general finding. Thirdly, this study discusses existentialism authenticity from the underlying constructs of intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity, while it does not assess the possible relationship between them. Existential authenticity is a complicated concept that represents a complex state of mind. Since the studies on the mechanism and logic of the interrelationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal authenticity are still few, it is hard to point out whether intrapersonal authenticity affects interpersonal authenticity or interpersonal authenticity affects intrapersonal authenticity. Future study should explore the relationship of each dimension of existential authenticity by mixed study combining both relevant qualitative and empirical methods for a further understanding the psychology and behavior of the tourists being studied. Fourthly, this study focused on the effects of underlying dimensions of existential authenticity on the different dimensions of place attachment. The concept of place attachment in this study was operationalized into two constructs (place dependence and place identity), while recent literature also found that affective attachment [90] and social bonding [91] can supplement into place attachment in order to measure emotional reactions and social interactive effects and better explain the human–land connection. Therefore, in future studies, more dimensions of place attachment could be added. Moreover, future study can continue to add other outcome variables, such as behavioral intentions and destination loyalty, to refine the conceptual model. Finally, this study examined the effect of destination experience on existential authenticity, but the factors that influence the formation of existential authenticity have still not been considered comprehensively. Future study can consider boundary conditions such as visit frequency and cultural distance [92] as moderators in the framework.

Author Contributions: The contribution of the authors are as follows: conceptualization, W.S., Q.Y., and N.C.; methodology, W.S., Q.Y., and N.C.; software, W.S., Q.Y.; validation, N.C.; formal analysis, W.S.; investigation, W.S.; resources, W.S., Q.Y., and N.C.; data curation, N.C. and W.S.; writing—original draft preparation, W.S., Q.Y., and N.C.; writing—review and editing, N.C.; visualization, N.C., Q.Y., and W.S.; supervision, N.C.; project administration, N.C. and W.S.; funding acquisition, W.S. and N.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the China Postdoctoral Science Foundation, grant number 2019M652600; the Henan Provincial Social Science Foundation of China, grant number 2019CJJ090; The Programming of Young Backbone Teachers in Institutions of Higher Learning of Henan Province, grant number (2018GGJS023); and the Research Project of Henan Provincial Social Science Circles Federation, grant number SKL-2019-3417.

Acknowledgments: The authors are particularly grateful to the editors and reviewers for their suggestions and comments on improving this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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