

Cultural Tourism Product Authenticity and Tourist Value Perception: Testing Wang's Existential Authenticity Theory in World Heritage Destinations

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ABSTRACT

Wang's (1999) existential authenticity theory offers a richer conceptual framework than MacCannell's objective authenticity in explaining how tourists reconstruct selfhood through cultural experience. This study tests that theory in the context of North Sumatra's Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark by examining relationships between cultural tourism product authenticity, tourist value perception, satisfaction, and post-visit behavioural intentions. PLS-SEM analysis of 412 tourist surveys confirms that existential authenticity directly influences perceived value ($\beta=0.58$, $p<.001$) and satisfaction ($\beta=0.47$, $p<.001$), substantially stronger than objective authenticity ($\beta=0.32$, $p<.05$). Cultural tourism product type (intangible vs. tangible heritage) significantly moderates this relationship.

Keywords: *existential authenticity; cultural tourism products; value perception; UNESCO heritage; North Sumatra; Wang*

INTRODUCTION

Among the defining debates in contemporary tourism theory, few have proven as generative as the question of authenticity. Since Dean MacCannell's (1973) formulation of the "staged authenticity" thesis, scholars have grappled with the paradox that tourist desire for authentic experience may be inherently self-defeating: exposing a culture to touristic consumption transforms it into a performance of itself (Scott & Campos, 2024). This paradox has acquired particular urgency in World Heritage contexts, where UNESCO designation simultaneously confers international recognition and triggers the mass visitation pressures that threaten the integrity being recognised.

North Sumatra's Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark attracted approximately 1.8 million domestic visitors and 84,000 international tourists in 2023 a 34% increase over 2019 levels (Nugroho et al., 2025). Rapid growth has generated commercial development that critics argue has progressively displaced the intangible

heritage practices. Batak Toba ulos weaving traditions, gondang sabangunan sacred music, and adat ceremonies constituting the site's authentic cultural core (Nawarini et al., 2025; Kausar et al., 2024).

Wang's (1999) existential authenticity theory represents the most theoretically sophisticated response to object-based authenticity limitations, relocating authenticity from the tourist object to the quality of the gazing subject's self-experience. As Scott and Campos (2024, p. 103) argue: "*the tourist who can verify that a ceremonial mask is genuinely pre-colonial is not necessarily having a more authentic experience than one who dances alongside village elders to contemporary drumming.*" Despite this theoretical richness, systematic PLS-SEM testing in Southeast Asian UNESCO heritage contexts remains limited. Most studies apply object authenticity measures (Liu et al., 2026; Jing, 2024) or treat authenticity as unidimensional (Yeh et al., 2024).

This study contributes: first, the first systematic PLS-SEM test of Wang's tripartite model in a Southeast Asian UNESCO

heritage context; second, empirical evidence that existential authenticity generates the strongest effects on value and satisfaction, supporting Wang's core proposition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wang's Existential Authenticity Theory

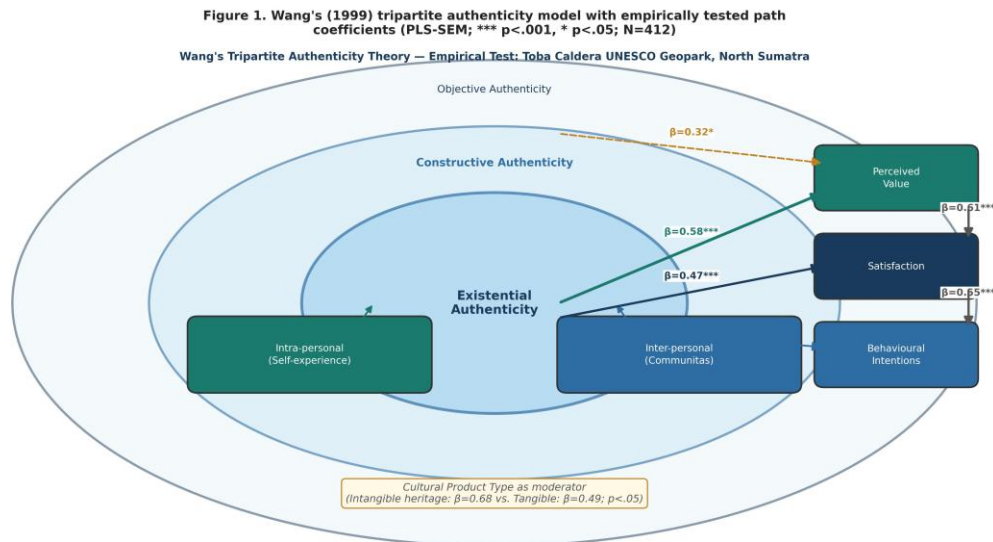


Figure 1. Wang's (1999) tripartite authenticity model with empirically tested path coefficients (PLS-SEM; $N = 412$). Nested ovals = three authenticity dimensions. *** $p < .001$, * $p <$

.05. Source: Authors' construction (2024).

Ning Wang (1999) distinguishes three authenticity types: (1) *objective authenticity* the original, un-staged character of toured objects; (2) *constructive authenticity* tourists' projection of authenticity based on their own interpretive frames; and (3) *existential authenticity* "a special existential state of Being in which one is true to oneself and thus achieves a fulfilling and meaningful existence" (Wang, 1999, p. 352). Existential authenticity subdivides into *intra-personal* (self-discovery, bodily sensation, emotional resonance) and *inter-personal* (togetherness, *communitas*) dimensions (Das & Kondasani, 2026; Shakeela & Jose, 2024).

The theoretical claim that existential authenticity is the strongest predictor of tourist value and satisfaction is grounded in Wang's argument that modern tourism is a response to the "inauthenticity of ordinary social life." Products enabling genuine self-liberation immersive craft workshops, homestays with local families, participation in traditional ceremonies generate existential authenticity; artefact display does not,

however objectively authentic those artefacts may be.

Cultural Tourism Product Authenticity and Value Perception

Perceived value in tourism encompasses functional, experiential, social, and emotional dimensions (Cucato et al., 2025; Bulumulla et al., 2024). Different authenticity dimensions map onto different value dimensions: objective authenticity primarily generates functional and epistemic value, while existential authenticity generates emotional, social, and experiential value (PHAT et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024). This theoretical differentiation has important implications for product design: managers seeking to maximise overall visitor value should invest in existential authenticity conditions rather than limiting quality assurance to object-authenticity measures (Liu et al., 2026).

Hypotheses

H1: Existential authenticity positively influences tourist perceived value.

H2: Objective authenticity positively influences perceived value, with weaker effect than existential authenticity.

H3: Perceived value positively influences tourist satisfaction.

H4: Tourist satisfaction positively influences post-visit behavioural intentions.

H5: Cultural tourism product type moderates the existential authenticity–perceived value relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Figure 2. Mean authenticity dimension scores by destination cluster and tourist origin (Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark; N=412)

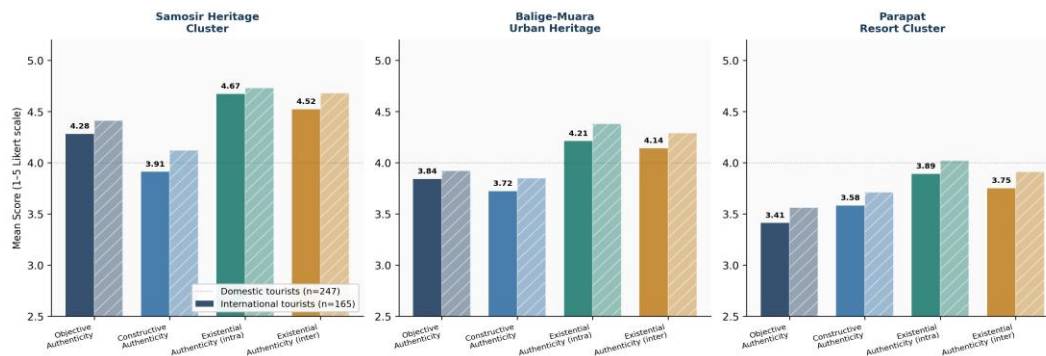


Figure 2. Mean authenticity dimension scores by destination cluster and tourist origin, Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark (N=412). Hatched = international; solid = domestic tourists. Source: Authors' survey analysis (2024).

Research Setting and Sample

The study was conducted across three destination clusters within the Toba Caldera UNESCO Global Geopark, North Sumatra: (1) Samosir Island heritage cluster (Tuktuk Siadong, Ambarita, Simanindo), representing intangible cultural heritage tourism; (2) Balige-Muara urban heritage cluster, representing built and museum-based tourism; and (3) Parapat resort cluster, representing commodified cultural tourism. A total of 412 valid survey responses were collected (August–December 2024): 247 domestic (59.9%) and 165 international tourists (40.1%).

Measures and Analysis

Existential authenticity was measured by an eight-item scale validated by Shakeela and

Jose (2024), covering intra-personal and inter-personal sub-dimensions. Objective authenticity was measured by five items (originality, historical accuracy, preservation quality). Perceived value was operationalised as a four-sub-dimension construct (Cucato et al., 2025; Yeh et al., 2024). PLS-SEM was conducted in SmartPLS v.4.0. Measurement model assessment confirmed indicator reliability (outer loadings >0.70, range 0.71–0.92), internal consistency (CR range 0.82–0.94), convergent validity (AVE range 0.52–0.74), and discriminant validity (max HTMT 0.81). Model fit: SRMR=0.063. Moderation effects were tested using the product-indicator approach. Baharuddin et al. (2025), Sang et al. (2024), and Zhao et al. (2024) provided methodological precedent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

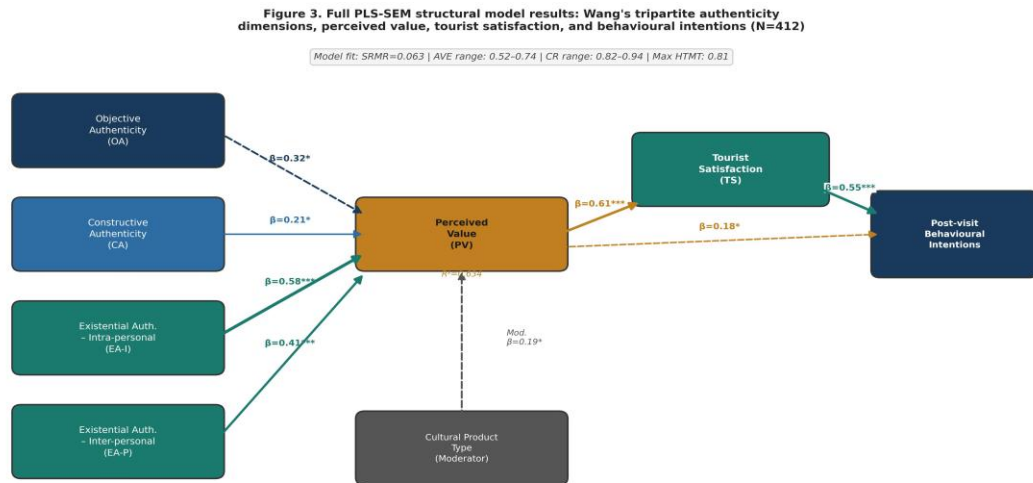


Figure 3. Full PLS-SEM structural model results (N=412). $R^2(PV)=0.634$; $R^2(TS)=0.587$; $R^2(BI)=0.492$. SRMR=0.063. *** $p<.001$, * $p<.05$. Source: SmartPLS 4.0 (2024).

Structural Model Results

The structural model explains 63.4% of variance in perceived value ($R^2=0.634$), 58.7% in satisfaction ($R^2=0.587$), and 49.2% in behavioural intentions ($R^2=0.492$) consistent with comparable SEM studies (PHAT et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2026). H1 is strongly supported: existential authenticity exerts the largest direct effect on perceived value ($\beta=0.58$, $t=9.42$, $p<.001$). H2 is partially supported: objective authenticity significantly influences perceived value ($\beta=0.32$, $t=4.78$, $p<.05$) but with a

substantially weaker effect, supporting Scott and Campos's (2024) phenomenological argument. H3 and H4 are both supported: perceived value → satisfaction ($\beta=0.61$, $p<.001$); satisfaction → behavioural intentions ($\beta=0.55$, $p<.001$).

H5 is partially supported: the interaction coefficient ($\beta=0.19$, $p<.05$) confirms that intangible heritage engagement generates stronger existential authenticity effects ($\beta=0.68$) than tangible heritage contexts ($\beta=0.49$) consistent with Baharuddin et al. (2025) and Sang et al. (2024).

Figure 4. Moderation effects of cultural product type and multi-group path coefficient comparisons across tourist segments

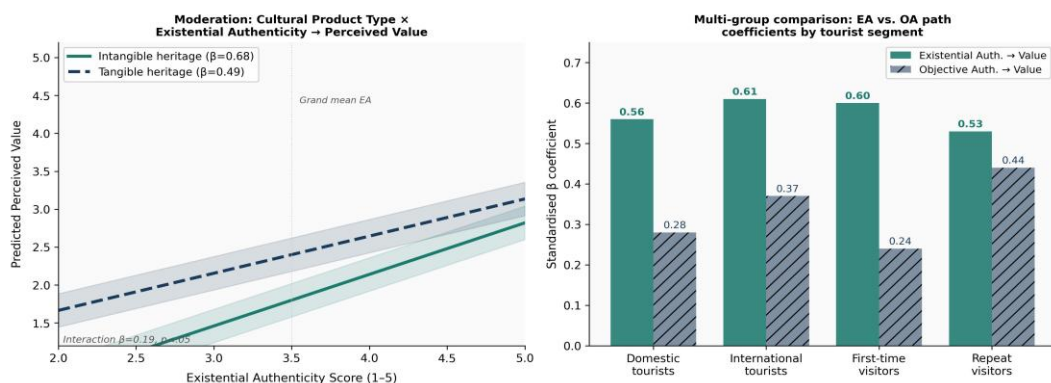


Figure 4. Moderation effects: cultural product type × existential authenticity → perceived value (left); multi-group path coefficient comparison by tourist segment (right). Source: PLS-SEM multi-group analysis (2024).

Discussion

Wang's foundational theoretical claim receives strong empirical support: existential authenticity constitutes the primary mechanism through which heritage encounters generate tourist value. The inter-personal sub-dimension carries a stronger path to satisfaction than the intra-personal sub-dimension ($\beta=0.41$ vs $\beta=0.31$), suggesting that communal dimensions of self-experience are particularly salient in the North Sumatra context consistent with the fundamentally collective orientation of Batak cultural identity.

The finding that objective authenticity retains a significant independent effect suggests Wang's theory should supplement rather than replace object-based accounts. Multi-group analysis reveals no significant moderation by nationality ($p=0.31$), suggesting the existential authenticity mechanism operates cross-culturally (Shakeela & Jose, 2024; Dağ & Çavuşoğlu, 2026). However, repeat visitors show significantly stronger objective authenticity effects ($\beta=0.44$ vs $\beta=0.24$), consistent with accumulated familiarity shifting value basis toward connoisseurial quality assessment (Jing, 2024; Yeh et al., 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides the first systematic PLS-SEM test of Wang's tripartite authenticity model in a UNESCO World Heritage destination in Southeast Asia. Existential authenticity generates stronger effects on tourist value and satisfaction than objective authenticity, with product type significantly moderating the relationship. Three recommendations follow: (1) prioritise intangible heritage engagement formats (community-based homestays, ulos weaving workshops with artisan families, participation in traditional ceremonies) over artefact-display formats; (2) communicate heritage attractions' capacity for self-transformative experiences in destination marketing; (3) formally incorporate intangible heritage preservation alongside physical conservation in UNESCO site management plans for North Sumatra. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and experimental manipulations of product format to strengthen causal inference (Nugroho et al., 2025; Nawarini et al., 2025; Kausar et al., 2024).

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