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## Authenticity: The Link Between Destination Image and Place Attachment

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationships between destination image, existential authenticity, and different dimensions of place attachment in the nature-based tourism context. A visitor-centric model is proposed in which existential authenticity is the principal mechanism that links destination image to different dimensions of place attachment. Data was collected in a survey of international visitors to two popular nature-based tourism destinations in Australia. The results indicate (a) a positive and significant effect of destination image on existential authenticity; (b) a positive and significant effect of existential authenticity on place dependence, place identity, place affect, and place social bonding; and (c) a significant mediating effect of existential authenticity in the relationship between destination image and each of the four dimensions of place attachment. The implications of this study for academics, tourism authorities, and destination marketing managers are discussed.

本研究探讨了自然旅游情景中目的地形象、存在的真实性及场所依赖的不同层面。提出了一个以游客为中心的模型，其中存在的真实性是连接目的地形象与不同场所依赖层面的主要机制。通过调查澳大利亚两个受欢迎的自然旅游目的地的国际游客采集数据。结果表明：(a) 目的地形象对存在的真实性有积极和显著的影响；(b) 存在的真实性对场所依赖、场所认同、场所影响和场所社会连结有积极和显著的影响；且 (c) 存在的真实性对目的地形象与场所依赖四个层面每个的关系有显著调和作用。同时讨论了本研究对学术、旅游主管部门和目的地营销经理的意义。

### KEYWORDS

Destination image; existential authenticity; mediating effect; nature-based tourism; place attachment

## Introduction

Authenticity has been widely recognized as the fundamental motivation for visitors (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and an essential concept in tourism (Knudsen, Rickly, & Vidon, 2016). Despite the plethora of research on authenticity in cultural heritage tourism, nature-based tourism (NBT) has rarely been the focal context for studying the concept of authenticity, although NBT is closely bound up with authenticity (Nevin, Swain, & Convery, 2014). The insufficient investigation of authenticity in NBT might restrict its practical application. NBT refers to “leisure travel undertaken largely or solely for the purpose of enjoying natural attractions and engaging in a variety of outdoor activities” (Tyrväinen, Uusitalo,

Silvennoinen, & Hasu, 2014, p. 1). NBT is acknowledged as one of the primary ways to experience one's true self. In other words, NBT mainly involves existential authenticity instead of object-based authenticity (Wang, 1999).

Existential authenticity is experience oriented (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Visitor experience has been emphasized by destination marketers as a key selling point of a tourism destination (Oppewal, Huybers, & Crouch, 2015) but generally remains under-researched (Tasci & Ko, 2016). The empirical analysis of the relationship between existential authenticity and other themes in tourism is inadequate, albeit the conceptualization of existential authenticity has been a heated topic independent from object-based authenticity in recent studies (e.g., Brown, 2013).

Existential authenticity highlights the significance of place in the visitor experience; however, limited attention has been paid to place in the authenticity scholarship (Ricky-Boyd, 2013). In particular, the relationship between authenticity and place attachment has been largely ignored (Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016). The scarce research on the relationship between these two constructs is fragmented and inconsistent. Place attachment has been found to predict authenticity in some studies (Budruk, White, Wodrich, & Van Riper, 2008; Ram et al., 2016). On the contrary, evidence from qualitative research (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014; Wildish, Kearns, & Collins, 2016) is scattered in the literature, indicating the influence of authenticity on place attachment. The inconclusive association between authenticity and place attachment necessitates further investigation.

Destination image is another concept under consideration. Including destination image in the framework is expected to improve the practicability of the study findings because destination image can be manipulated and controlled by destination marketers. Destination image was contended to influence existential authenticity (Marine-Roig, 2015), but there have been few attempts to empirically substantiate this relationship. Meanwhile, empirical research on visitor experience as the indirect association between destination image and place attachment is theoretically and practically required (Jiang, Ramkissoon, & Mavondo, 2015).

This study seeks to address the research gaps by exploring the role of existential authenticity in NBT. It is original in simultaneously examining the structural relationships between destination image, existential authenticity, and different dimensions of place attachment. This study makes the following contributions: First, it examines existential authenticity as a principal mechanism that links destination image to place attachment, and sheds new light on the relationship between authenticity and important themes in tourism. It also develops valid measures of existential authenticity and extends extant knowledge on place attachment. Practically, an improved knowledge about existential authenticity is anticipated to facilitate the formation of more effective experiential marketing strategies and tactics at NBT destinations.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses development

### **Destination image**

The increasingly fierce competition amongst tourism destinations is primarily based on the perceived image (Michaelidou, Siamagka, Moraes, & Micevski, 2013). Destination image in this study is defined as the aggregate of beliefs, ideas, and impressions an individual holds

toward a particular setting (Kim & Perdue, 2011). It is examined using the multiattribute approach. Because the affective image and the holistic image are both shaped upon the cognitive perception of destination attributes (Agapito, Oom Do Valle, & Da Costa Mendes, 2013), which is prominent as the principal topic of enquiry (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014); the majority of empirical studies in tourism highlight the cognitive dimension of destination image (Jiang et al., 2015); besides, focusing on the attribute-based destination image may contribute to the improved allocation of destination resources.

As one of the principal features that determine perceived destination image, destination environment is a key indicator of the destination quality (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000). It encompasses both the natural aspect (e.g., beauty of the scenery) and the social aspect (e.g., hospitality and friendliness of the local residents; Beerli & Martin, 2004). The image of a NBT destination is largely explained by the scenic beauty of natural attractions (Ramseook-Munhurrun, Seebaluck, & Naidoo, 2015). Activities such as adventures based on the natural attraction are also recognized as the destination attraction (Wu & Liang, 2011). Destination environment is recognized as the most important factor of a tourism destination for international visitors, followed by the destination service infrastructure (Mo, Howard, & Havitz, 1993). Destination facilities include accommodation, transportation, and cuisine, which sustain the destination and meet the basic needs of visitors (Lee, Huang, & Yeh, 2010). Besides, service at a destination is also an important component of destination image (Tavitiyaman & Qu, 2013).

### ***Existential authenticity***

Authenticity is connected with what is genuine, real, and/or true (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The conventional concept of authenticity is object-based, depicted by the terms “objective authenticity” and “constructive authenticity” (Wang, 1999). The former means that authenticity is generated from the recognition of the toured object as inherently original instead of a copy or an imitation (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), while the latter denotes that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of the nature of what is observed rather than the feature intrinsic to an object (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Although broadly discussed, the object-based notion of authenticity has been criticized for its limited applicability in explaining visitor motivations and experiences (Wang, 1999). In order to enhance the explanatory power of the authenticity concept, Wang (1999) emphasized the importance of the activity-related authenticity, termed as “existential authenticity.” Existential authenticity is experience-oriented; it denotes the visitor’s perception of the genuineness of experiences associated with self-discovery and self-realization rather than the genuineness of toured objects (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). More specifically, existential authenticity refers to a state of existential being (being one’s true self or being true to one’s nature) that can be activated or pursued through engaging in tourism activities (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Existential authenticity is divided into two ranges, intrapersonal authenticity and interpersonal authenticity (Wang, 1999). The former indicates truthful bodily feelings (pleasure, relaxation, and spontaneity) and self-making (Zhu, 2012). The liberation from constrictions of daily life at a tourism destination facilitates the fulfillment of the authentic self (Brown, 2013). The latter refers to sincere human interactions based on the individual’s real self (Lau, 2010), for example, the shared experience of a group of pilgrims (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008).

This study focuses on the experience-oriented authenticity, or existential authenticity. Theoretically, existential authenticity has been emphasized by scholars as the most appropriate approach to study the concept of authenticity (Ricky-Boyd, 2013; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). It is also a suitable and important notion for investigating the visitor experience in the NBT context (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011). Practically, existential authenticity is the most essential element in the evaluation of the best tourism destination (Lew, 2011). Moreover, existential authenticity conforms to the visitor-centric perspective because it conceptually shifts the focus of authenticity from the toured object to a sense of being that resides in the individual visitor (Knudsen et al., 2016).

### **Place attachment**

Rooted in the attachment theory, the concept of place attachment describes the positive bond between an individual and a physical or social setting (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003). Place attachment is a vital predictor of visitor loyalty (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014) and a crucial indicator of destination marketing success in NBT (Kil, Holland, Stein, & Ko, 2012). Literature has suggested that the multidimensional consideration of place attachment can offer a better apprehension of its relations with other concepts than a unidimensional perspective (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013a).

Based on the recent literature that investigates place attachment as a multifaceted concept (e.g., Brown, Smith, & Assaker, 2016), this study uses place dependence, place identity, place affect, and place social bonding to reflect the range of feelings an individual hold when connected with a particular setting.

Place dependence depicts the suitability of a place in meeting an individual's functional needs (Suntikul & Jachna, 2016). Place dependence is based on the physical features and conditions of a place (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). For example, golfers develop attachment to a golf course due to its attributes that facilitate the enjoyment of playing golf (Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012). Place identity is another commonly conceptualized dimension of place attachment (Loureiro, 2014). It denotes the symbolic attachment to a place (Lee, 2011) and represents the congruence between a place and an individual's self-concept (Jiang et al., 2015). In a nature-based context, environmental identity is used to depict the symbolically important link between an individual and the natural setting (Halpenny, 2010).

Place attachment is also a positive emotional tie or an affective bond between an individual and a particular setting (Debenedetti et al., 2014), which is conceptualized as place affect (Brown et al., 2016). Affect, emotion, and feelings constitute the core of the place attachment concept (Tonge, Ryan, Moore, & Beckley, 2015). Emotive ties signified by the love for a place are formed through developing sentiments toward the place and endowing it with a particular meaning (Ramkissoon, Weiler, & Smith, 2012).

Attachment to a setting is socially driven (Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012). The tour is a collective creation (Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010) accompanied by social interactions of visitors. Place social bonding describes the process that meaningful interpersonal relationships in a place enhance the sense of belonging to a group and the particular setting (Hammitt, Kyle, & Oh, 2009; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005).

## ***Destination image and existential authenticity***

Destination image is closely associated with a visitor's perception of experiences (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Specifically, it has been evidenced to positively affect the visitor's evaluation of experiences at a tourism destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). The favorable impression of a tourism destination in the visitor's mind triggers positive predisposition (Jiang et al., 2015), which motivates the visitor to experience authenticity and positively perceive the genuineness of the experience.

The destination attraction contributes to the perceived authenticity (Ram et al., 2016). When engaging in adventure activities at a destination, the visitor gets closer to the authentic self by facing and overcoming experiential challenges (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Therefore, destination image might positively influence intrapersonal authenticity. It is also arguable that a favorable destination image may enhance interpersonal authenticity through the social aspect of the destination environment and services at the destination. Friendliness of local residents makes the encounter between visitors and locals more enjoyable, which leads to a fulfilling experience for visitors (Sharpley, 2014). In addition, the service staff is one of the core elements that contribute to the authentic experience of the customer (Debenedetti et al., 2014).

Particularly in NBT, the close contact with the natural environment enhances the authenticity of the experience (Mura, 2015). The exceptional natural scenery triggers sensory stimulation that leads to the deepest experience of existential authenticity (Lew, 2011).

In line with the previous discussion, the following hypothesis arises:

**H1:** Destination image positively influences existential authenticity.

## ***Existential authenticity and place attachment***

Place attachment and authenticity are positively correlated (Ram et al., 2016). Pilgrims get attached to sacred places because of the authenticity they experience at these sites (Belhassen et al., 2008). Visitors establish deep connections to a hostel through experiences centered on a sense of freedom, relaxation, and proximity to nature (Wildish et al., 2016).

Existential authenticity might positively influence place dependence because authenticity leads to fewer depressive symptoms and greater self-esteem (Wenzel & Lucas-Thompson, 2012). It is arguable that existential authenticity has a positive impact on place identity. Place identity develops when a place offers the opportunity to both express and affirm one's self-concept (Budruk, Thomas, & Tyrrell, 2009). An individual gets more freely self-represented because of authentic experiences (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Authenticity helps to combat the confusion and uncertainty of one's self-concept in that authenticity facilitates getting in connection with one's inner self, knowing oneself and understanding one's own identity (Allen & Mendick, 2013).

When a visitor engages in sincere interpersonal interactions based on the true self, they are more likely to establish meaningful social relations thereby developing social bonding to a place (Buchmann et al., 2010). Authenticity is also evidenced to enhance place affect. Debenedetti et al. (2014) found that emotional bonds to commercial settings such as restaurants and theatres emanate from the customer's perception of authenticity. Additionally, the customer's trust toward a firm is critical to the emotional attachment formation (Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramatari, & Vrechopoulos, 2010), while authenticity

perceived by the customer has a significant impact on customer trust (Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Güldenberg, 2013).

The preceding review of literature informs the following hypotheses:

- H2:** Existential authenticity positively influences (a) place dependence, (b) place identity, (c) place affect, and (d) place social bonding.

### ***The mediating role of existential authenticity***

The conceptual model of the present study is developed based on the adaptation of the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) theory (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and the marketing literature. In the classical S-O-R framework, "stimulus" represents external factors that influence the internal states of the individual (Chang, Eckman, & Yan, 2011). "Organism" is conceptualized as "internal processes and structures intervening between stimuli external to the person and the final actions, reactions, or responses emitted" (Bagozzi, 1986, p. 46). The internal processes and structures include perceptual and thinking activities (Chang et al., 2011). The final outcome, "response," refers to the approach or avoidance behavior of the customer in the classical S-O-R model (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). However, Jacoby (2002) developed the S-O-R model, arguing that the response section does not only contain behaviors externally detectable, but also comprises of internal responses, such as satisfaction (Jacoby, 2002), which is closely related to place attachment (Brown et al., 2016).

There is abundant evidence in recent literature indicating the focal role of customer perceptions in the relations between marketing stimuli and marketing outcomes. The restaurant image is found to be a significant antecedent of customer perceived value, which is informative upon customer satisfaction (Ryu, Lee, & Gon Kim, 2012). Dining atmospherics indirectly affect customers' behavioral intentions through perceived quality of service and food (Ha & Jang, 2012). Grounded in the pre-existing studies, it can be anticipated that existential authenticity perceived by visitors mediates the relationship between destination image and different dimensions of place attachment.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

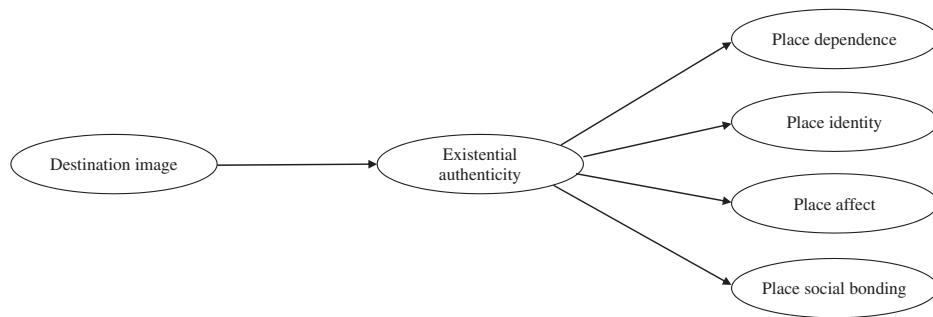
- H3:** Existential authenticity mediates the relationship between destination image and (a) place dependence, (b) place identity, (c) place affect, and (d) place social bonding.

The relationships discussed previously are illustrated in an integrative model (see Figure 1).

## **Methodology**

### ***Study location and sample***

The proposed model was tested among international visitors to NBT destinations in Australia. International tourism is one of the world's largest export earners (Eilat &



**Figure 1.** Proposed model.

Einav, 2004) and Australia's largest services export earner (Tourism Australia, 2010). Given the trend that Australians increasingly choose to go abroad for leisure tourism rather than domestically, international visitors to Australia should receive substantial attention because of the significance and development potential of the inbound tourism market (Tourism Australia, 2010). The competitiveness of the Australian tourism industry primarily lies in NBT, because Australia has the highest number of World Heritage listed natural sites on this planet with rich natural resources, diverse fauna, and a comparatively pristine natural environment (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013).

More than one NBT destination was selected in order to improve the representativeness of the sample (Vengesayi, Mavondo, & Reisinger, 2009). An on-site survey method was employed to collect data from international visitors to Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) and Phillip Island. With outstanding natural attractions and the popularity among international visitors, TNQ and Phillip Island provide suitable and valuable cases for the purpose of this study.

TNQ is the only place on earth that has two world natural heritage listed sites. The Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is the primary attraction for visitors to TNQ, followed by Daintree, the world's oldest tropical rainforest. The GBR is the world's largest natural heritage area and home to an abundance of marine life. Visitors to the GBR can enjoy diverse activities such as snorkeling and scuba diving. International visitation to TNQ increased by 5.7% to 781,000 in the year ending December 2015 (Tourism & Events Queensland, 2016). Cairns is the center of and getaway to TNQ, with front door access to the GBR and the Daintree Rainforest.

Phillip Island mainly offers wildlife attractions. The Phillip Island Penguin Parade is one of Australia's most popular attractions among international visitors. It offers visitors the unique experience of watching the world's smallest penguins toddling up the beach to their burrows. In the Koala Conservation Centre, tree top boardwalks and close viewing areas allow visitors to see koalas in their natural habitats. Besides, there are other natural attractions at Phillip Island; for example, the Nobbies, the magnificent headland with coastal views where visitors can watch seals.

Data of visitors to TNQ was collected in November 2015 at Reef Fleet Terminal at Cairns Esplanade, the main terminal for GBR vessels and tours. At Phillip Island, the fieldwork was conducted at Penguin Parade and Koala Conservation Centre in January 2016.

### Scale development process

Due to the deficiency of previous scaling effort on existential authenticity in the NBT context, a combination of structured and unstructured methods were employed to develop measures of existential authenticity. The combination of methods has been regarded as the most appropriate measurement development approach (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Existential authenticity was operationalized based on previous conceptualizations, a focus group of tourism experts and interviews among visitors to NBT destinations in Australia. The reflective measurement model that dominates psychological and management sciences was applied (Coltman, Devinney, Midgley, & Venaik, 2008). “An authentic experience … is one in which individuals feel themselves to be in touch … with their real selves” (Handler & Saxton, 1988, p. 243) informed the item “I am in touch with my real self,” which was modified to “I am in touch with my feelings and emotions” according to the qualitative findings. “But … some people are interested in self-discovery and self-expressive experiences, reflected in the growth in experiential tourism” (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006, p. 312) informed the item “I am able to discover more about myself.” The item “Visitors at this destination interact with each other in a genuine way” was derived and adjusted from the statement: “Authenticity refers to truthful human relationships or individuals interacting on the basis of their real selves” (Lau, 2010, p. 480).

Destination image was measured using two items borrowed from Prayag and Ryan (2012) and four items borrowed from Lee, Lee, and Lee (2005) measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Twelve items adapted from Kyle et al. (2005), Jorgensen and Stedman (2006), Prayag and Ryan (2012), and Yuksel, Yuksel, and Bilim (2010) were used to capture four dimensions of place attachment on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

### Survey sample and data collection

Because the survey was carried out at tourism destinations in Australia where China has been the most valuable international tourism market in terms of visitor expenditure and visitor nights (Tourism Australia, 2015), the questionnaire was designed and administered in both English and Chinese. International visitors over the age of 18 were considered as the target study population. The researcher approached visitors on a next-to-pass basis and asked a qualifying question (“Are you an Australian resident?”) to make sure the potential respondent belonged to the target population. Out of 296 collected questionnaires at two destinations (70 from TNQ, 226 from Phillip Island), 26 questionnaires with missing data were eliminated to avoid statistical bias (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006), leaving 270 surveys for analysis.

Respondents spread well across different age, employment, education, and travel party categories. Most of the respondents were between 18 and 35 years old (71%). There were more male (54%) than female (46%) respondents. The majority (89%) of respondents were independent travelers. The visitor profile in terms of country of origin aligned with the official report, which showed Asia as a major tourism market for Australia with China leading the way (Tourism Australia, 2011).

## **Exploratory factor analysis**

Measurements of constructs in the framework were subject to exploratory factor analysis because the scale items were either developed or adapted from previous studies. Principal axis factoring was used as the extraction method to maximize the distinctiveness of factors. **Table 1** shows the psychometric properties of each variable in the measurement model.

## **Overall measurement model**

The overall fit of the measurement model was assessed by AMOS (V.23) structural equation modeling software. The model showed acceptable fit to the data (Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 334.92$ ;  $df = 168$ ;  $CMin/df = 1.99$ ;  $GFI = 0.90$ ;  $AGFI = 0.86$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ;  $TLI = 0.94$ ;  $CFI = 0.95$ ;  $NFI = 0.91$ ).

**Table 1.** Psychometric properties of variables.

Constructs and scale items	Factor loadings	M	SD	% explained variance	Cronbach's alpha
Destination image				50.97	
Destination environment				24.73	0.70
IMG1: Friendly local people	0.80	5.71	1.131		
IMG2: Beautiful natural attractions	0.56	6.14	1.020		
Destination services and facilities				26.24	0.78
IMG3: A safe place to visit	0.47	5.94	1.115		
IMG4: Good quality accommodation at or near this destination	0.58	5.30	1.239		
IMG5: Good value for money	0.70	5.24	1.343		
IMG6: Well-trained staff	0.60	5.59	1.156		
Existential authenticity				53.74	0.75
AUT1: I am able to discover more about myself at this destination.	0.85	4.46	1.354		
AUT2: I am in touch with my feelings and emotions at this destination.	0.79	4.81	1.374		
AUT3: Visitors at this destination interact with each other in a genuine way.	0.51	5.07	1.229		
Place dependence				68.56	0.87
PD1: I enjoy visiting this destination and its environment more than any other destination.	0.85	4.47	1.376		
PD2: Because of the experience I had at this destination, I would not substitute it for any other destination.	0.82	4.39	1.564		
PD3: For what I like to do, I could not imagine anything better than the settings and facilities provided by this destination.	0.81	4.14	1.474		
Place identity				72.99	0.89
PI1: Visiting this destination says a lot about who I am.	0.80	4.28	1.524		
PI2: There is congruence between this destination and my self-identity.	0.87	4.07	1.501		
PI3: This destination reflects the person I am.	0.90	4.03	1.649		
Place affect				68.04	0.86
PA1: I feel a strong sense of belonging to this destination.	0.84	3.94	1.578		
PA2: This destination means a lot to me.	0.88	4.22	1.518		
PA3: I will miss this destination when I am away from it.	0.75	4.78	1.581		
Place social bonding				78.05	0.91
PSB1: I have a special connection to this destination and the people who visit it.	0.85	3.91	1.637		
PSB2: This destination facilitates my interpersonal relationships with others.	0.96	3.96	1.588		
PSB3: I have meaningful social interactions at this destination.	0.84	4.22	1.524		

**Table 2.** Correlation, square root of AVE, and internal consistency.

	Destination environment	Destination services and facilities	Existential authenticity	Place dependence	Place identity	Place affect	Place social bonding
Destination environment	0.74	0.72***	0.14**	0.17**	0.12*	0.26***	0.13*
Destination services and facilities	0.84***	0.68	0.15**	0.24***	0.10	0.18***	0.00
Existential authenticity	0.26**	0.27***	0.73	0.53***	0.66***	0.65***	0.61***
Place dependence	0.29***	0.36***	0.65***	0.83	0.55***	0.60***	0.48***
Place identity	0.24**	0.22**	0.78***	0.67***	0.85	0.78***	0.66***
Place affect	0.38***	0.30***	0.77***	0.72***	0.90***	0.82	0.73***
Place social bonding	0.25**	0.12**	0.73***	0.60***	0.78***	0.85***	0.88
Composite reliability	0.70	0.78	0.77	0.87	0.89	0.86	0.92
AVE	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.69	0.73	0.68	0.78

Note. Figures on the diagonal are the square roots of AVE. Zero order correlations appear below the diagonal. Correlations adjusted for potential CMV appear above the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed). \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed). \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

As shown in Table 2, the composite reliabilities were above the acceptable value of 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct was 0.50 or higher, suggesting adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2006). To examine discriminant validity, the square roots of AVE for any two latent variables were compared to the correlation between these two latent variables (Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2013). Most of the square roots of AVE were higher than the correlations between the corresponding latent variables, which provided evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

For latent variables between which the correlations were higher than the square roots of AVE, discriminant validity was further examined by the chi-square difference test (Atuahene-Gima, 2005). Chi-square difference test was conducted for each pair of latent variables that appeared highly correlated. The procedure involves running an unconstrained model and a constrained model (where the correlation is fixed at 1), then comparing the degree of worsening of the unconstrained model. For the two dimensions of destination image (destination environment, destination services and facilities),  $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 23.89$  (1),  $p < .001$ ; for place identity and place affect,  $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 8.82$  (1),  $p < .01$ ; for place affect and place social bonding,  $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 15.73$  (1),  $p < .001$ . A significant worsening of the unconstrained model showed that these were distinct constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Where the correlations appeared high and could not be resolved using the chi-square difference test, such as between place identity and existential authenticity, and between place affect and existential authenticity, prior operationalization was utilized as the justification for keeping the variables separate. Previous studies have shown that place identity and authenticity, although highly correlated, are fundamentally different constructs (Budruk et al., 2008; Marine-Roig, 2015). Similarly, emotional attachment to a place has been found to be closely correlated with but fundamentally distinct from authenticity (Ram et al., 2016).



### **Common method variance**

As this study used the survey instrument, more specifically, the standardized self-report questionnaire to gather data for independent and dependent variables from the same respondents, common method variance (CMV) might be a concern. Nonetheless, it is common in the tourism and hospitality research to address destination image, visitor experiences and destination marketing outcomes in the same questionnaire (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ram et al., 2016).

In order to minimize any potential CMV bias, several measures were taken. First, at the questionnaire design stage, a pilot test was conducted to eliminate any vague or incomprehensible terms, and to ensure that individual questions and the whole questionnaire were succinctly formulated (Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). Second, at the survey administration stage, respondents were assured of “the anonymity and confidentiality of the study,” and that there were “no right or wrong answers” because “more fact-based questionnaire items are less likely to be associated with CMV (Chang et al., 2010, p. 180).

To assess CMV, the smallest positive correlation was subtracted from all manifest correlations (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). The CMV-adjusted correlations between variables are shown above the diagonal in Table 2. The majority of the partial correlations were statistically significant, which supported that CMV was not a concern in this study (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Malhotra, Kim, & Patil, 2006).

### **Structural model and hypotheses testing**

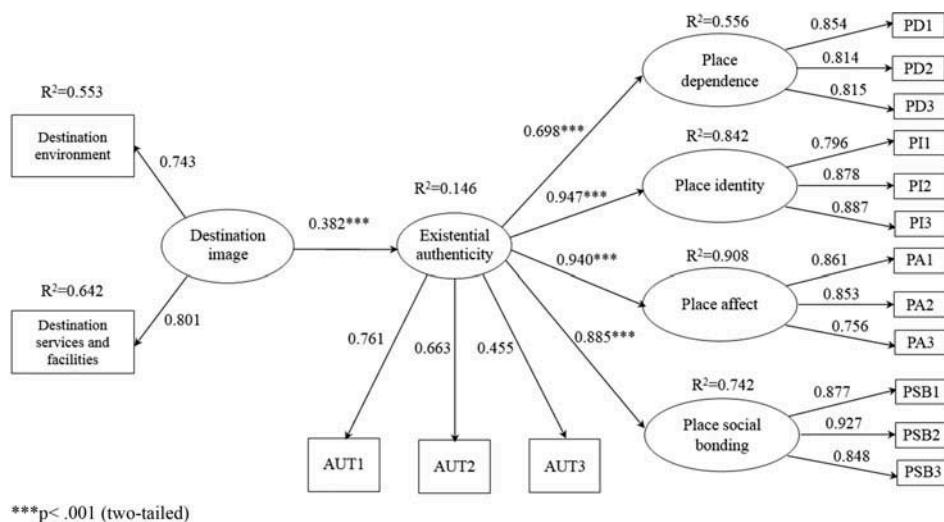
As a combination of the measurement and path models, the structural model was examined using confirmatory factor analysis. The goodness-of-fit statistics indicated that the structural model fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 267.10$ ;  $df = 110$ ;  $CMin/df = 2.43$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.07$ ;  $GFI = 0.90$ ,  $AGFI = 0.85$ ,  $NFI = 0.92$ ;  $TLI = 0.94$ ;  $CFI = 0.95$ ). All the hypotheses are supported (see Table 3). The structural model with path estimates is shown in Figure 2.

H1, which hypothesizes that destination image positively influences existential authenticity, is supported ( $\beta = 0.382$ ,  $t = 4.345$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This is in line with the argument and finding in the previous literature that destination image is positively

**Table 3.** Results of hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses	Direct effects (coefficient)	Indirect effects (t value)	Support/Not support
H1: Destination image → Existential authenticity	0.382***		Supported
H2a: Existential authenticity → Place dependence	0.698***		Supported
H2b: Existential authenticity → Place identity	0.947***		Supported
H2c: Existential authenticity → Place affect	0.940***		Supported
H2d: Existential authenticity → Place social bonding	0.885***		Supported
H3a: Destination image → Existential authenticity → Place dependence		3.159**	Supported
H3b: Destination image → Existential authenticity → Place identity		3.017**	Supported
H3c: Destination image → Existential authenticity → Place affect		3.121**	Supported
H3d: Destination image → Existential authenticity → Place social bonding		3.380***	Supported

\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed). \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).



**Figure 2.** Structural model with path estimates.

related with the visitor's perception of experiences at a destination (Jiang et al., 2015; Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

H2a, H2b, H2c, and H2d are also supported, which suggests a significant positive effect of existential authenticity on place dependence ( $\beta = 0.698$ ,  $t = 9.680$ ,  $p < .001$ ), on place identity ( $\beta = 0.947$ ,  $t = 11.915$ ,  $p < .001$ ), on place affect ( $\beta = 0.940$ ,  $t = 13.082$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and on place social bonding ( $\beta = 0.885$ ,  $t = 12.268$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The finding reinforces the existence of a positive correlation between authenticity and place attachment (Ram et al., 2016). It is consistent with early place theories in the environmental psychology literature suggesting that the experience with a place gives rise to attachment to the place (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013b), and with studies in tourism and services marketing indicating the influence of perceived authenticity on place attachment (Debenedetti et al., 2014; Wildish et al., 2016).

Existential authenticity is found to mediate the relationship of destination image with place dependence ( $t = 3.159$ ,  $p < .01$ ), place identity ( $t = 3.017$ ,  $p < .01$ ), place affect ( $t = 3.121$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and place social bonding ( $t = 3.380$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Hence H3a, H3b, H3c, and H3d are supported. This result implies that destination image positively influences place attachment, which is consistent with other studies in services marketing (Debenedetti et al., 2014) and tourism (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013). The research finding also empirically corroborates the importance and centrality of the authentic experience contended by the tourism (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and marketing literature (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).



## Contributions and implications

### Theoretical contributions

By applying the S-O-R paradigm in the NBT context, this study is original in simultaneously exploring the relationships between destination image, existential authenticity and different dimensions of place attachment. To the authors' knowledge, few studies, if any have explored the mediating effect of perceived authenticity between destination image and place attachment. The lens of mediation contributes to the refining of the theoretical relations between destination image, existential authenticity, and place attachment. This study thus advances the theory development beyond the simple direct relationships and offers a more precise depiction of the link between destination image and place attachment. This study improves the understanding of the relationship between destination image and existential authenticity by empirically confirming the argument in previous literature (Marine-Roig, 2015). Moreover, given that authenticity has been found to be a determinant of destination image (Lu, Chi, & Liu, 2015), the present study offers a new perspective of looking at the relationship between destination image and authenticity with destination image as the antecedent.

Further, previous research revealed place attachment as a predictor of authenticity (Ram et al., 2016), while the present study reverses this relationship and shows existential authenticity as a positive antecedent of all dimensions of place attachment. This sheds new light on the relationship between authenticity and place attachment.

The focus on existential authenticity as the central linkage between destination image and place attachment in this study lends support to the emphasis on existential authenticity by previous literature (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). It also yields "a theoretical framework for going beyond the object-oriented perspective" (Ricky-Boyd, 2013, p.680). Therefore, by investigating existential authenticity, this study accords with the experiential nature of tourism and enriches the understanding of the visitor experience that is generally underresearched.

From the standpoint of the lack of research of authenticity in NBT, this study contributes to establishing the importance of authenticity particularly in NBT destinations (Ramkissoon & Uysal., 2011, 2014). It provides a clearer elaboration of existential authenticity in NBT by linking the concept to other important themes as well as investigating its antecedents and consequences barely covered by prior research. Considering the deficiency of scaling efforts in the NBT context and the lack of consensus on the operationalization of authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), the valid measures of existential authenticity developed in this study contribute to the conceptual clarification and operationalization of authenticity in the NBT domain.

Besides, this study holds methodological implications for the operationalization of attribute-based destination image in the NBT context. The delineation of destination image through destination environment and destination services and facilities captures the essential elements in destination image (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Murphy et al., 2000). The operationalization of destination image in this study could be of interest to researchers with the intention of examining this concept.

By exploring different dimensions of place attachment as first-order factors in the structural framework, this study offers deeper insight into the relationship between place attachment, destination image and existential authenticity. It also provides

methodological implications for future research to capture the conceptual range of place attachment by consolidating the factor structure of place attachment.

Finally, this study extends the theoretical realm of different dimensions of place attachment to international visitors. It addresses the concern of previous literature (Ramkissoon et al., 2013b) about the relevance of place attachment in the case of international visitors by showing that all the four sub-dimensions of place attachment are salient marketing outcomes for international visitors.

In short, this study enriches the research body of two primary avenues in tourism and hospitality; namely, tourist behavior, as well as destination marketing and management (Nunkoo, Gursoy, & Ramkissoon, 2013).

### ***Managerial implications***

Primarily, the visitor-centric view taken by this study could lead to “a more realistic representation of contemporary tourists and more operative implications for tourism marketing” (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010, p. 655). It accentuates the need to understand what visitors experience at a destination, how they feel about the destination and what it means to them in the destination marketing and management practice. It also underlines the importance of utilizing the knowledge of visitors’ perceptions and experiences to optimize investment priorities.

The inquiry of existential authenticity highlights the experiential view in destination marketing and may assist in the improvement of experiential marketing practices at NBT destinations. Specifically, this study suggests that international visitors can get attached to a NBT destination both perceptually and emotionally when they experience existential authenticity. Destination managers could consider using experiential marketing tactics for improving customer loyalty in the inbound tourism market.

This study indicates that in order to make visitors attached to the destination, it is necessary for destination managers to understand how visitors experience authenticity at the destination. In the nature-based settings, a visitor gets closer to the authentic self by taking adventure activities. To this end, NBT destinations could consider constantly developing adventure based products and events to offer a variety of adventure opportunities while providing a safe environment for visitors to engage in them.

Another important learning that emerges from the research findings is that destination marketers can positively influence visitors’ existential experiences via properly managed destination image. The framework can enable destination marketers to identify destination attributes that are critical antecedents of existential authenticity. The beauty of the natural attraction is a focal constituent of the NBT destination image. Tourism authorities and destination managers should collectively cooperate in the enduring protection, preservation, and maintenance of natural assets. Further, as natural attractions are greatly impacted by weather conditions, tourism authorities are advised to prepare nature-based destinations for seasonal and extreme weather patterns. The research findings could also generate benefit for the ecotourism practice in nature-based environments (Lu, Gursoy, & Del Chiappa, 2016). The conservation of natural attractions is likely to improve the experience of ecotourism visitors. The friendliness of local people is another important element of destination environment that can lead to the visitor’s authentic experience. Given the fact that local residents recognize negative consequences of tourism to the

destination community (Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Carter, 2007), broad-based communication with the aim of mutual understanding and awareness campaigns are suggested approaches to increase local residents' appreciation of the industry and gain greater support from the destination community.

With regard to destination services and facilities, one of the priorities of the NBT destination management strategy should be to facilitate investment into the infrastructure development, such as improving the quality of accommodation. Tourism authorities are advised to ensure that destinations operate at the highest standard of safety through effective industry development programs. Tourism authorities also need to cultivate a skilled tourism workforce to better serve the increasingly demanding and sophisticated visitors. Destination managers are advised to renew and implement staff training programs in line with the updated feedback from visitors. Based on the effort in the aforementioned areas, destinations should optimize the value proposition and improve the value delivery process. To conclude, identifying critical attributes and addressing corresponding issues would assist more efficient allocation of destination resources with the aim of creating and enhancing authentic experiences for visitors.

In terms of the marketing communication, this study suggests that destination marketing and management should highlight the notions of existential authenticity. The findings of this study show that visitors experience existential authenticity through genuine feelings. This is in line with the trend that people are striving to attain emotional achievement through leisure tourism. Imbedding elements of feelings in the positioning and marketing activities would result in more effective destination marketing than the mere description of the natural beauty of the destination.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

The aforementioned conclusions need to be interpreted with caution because the current study has several limitations, which present opportunities for future studies. The first limitation relates to the specific context of the NBT destination in this study. As authenticity is crucial to cultural heritage destinations, the examination of the model in other leisure contexts such as the cultural heritage tourism to assess the generalizability of the model and the external validity of the current research findings is warranted.

This study, due to its experiential perspective, focuses on existential authenticity. Object-based authenticity has been found to correlate with existential authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Incorporating object-based authenticity as another potential mediator is expected to improve the predictive power of the model.

Further, the findings of this study show a significant and positive correlation between destination image and existential authenticity, with destination image as the antecedent. However, destination image has been found to be determined by authenticity (Lu et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the study results reveal a significantly positive correlation between existential authenticity and different dimensions of place attachment with existential authenticity as the antecedent, while place attachment has been found in recent literature to determine authenticity (Ram et al., 2016). There would be value for future research to use this study as a springboard and shed further light on the relationship between destination image and authenticity, as well as between authenticity and different dimensions of place attachment.

By focusing on some important elements in destination marketing and visitor psychology, this study is not entirely comprehensive in reviewing factors that influence the formation of place attachment. The integration of other factors into the framework merits future academic effort. For example, fun is a crucial element in visitor experiences (Tasci & Ko, 2016) that may also make visitors feel attached to a destination. Moreover, this study solely incorporates the indirect effect of mediation. Future research can consider boundary conditions by including moderators in the framework. For example, gender may be explored as a potential moderator because of its influence on place attachment (Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015).

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