Article

Do Tourists Really Care about Authenticity? A Study on Tourists' Perceptions of Nature and Culture Authenticity

Li Li * and Shasha Li

Jangho Architecture College, Northeastern University, Shenyang 110169, China; lisa851214@163.com
* Correspondence: lily1250000@126.com

Abstract: The role that authenticity plays in tourism is debatable. Researchers have focused on the nature of authenticity, while the natural landscape is taken for granted as authentic. "Landscape" is the symbolic environment created by human acts of conferring meaning to nature and the environment. The concept of nature authenticity is proposed to enrich the connotation of authenticity. A structural equation model was used to analyze the relationships between motivation, perceived authenticity, destination image and satisfaction. The results indicate that perceived authenticity positively affects tourists' perceptions of the destination image in both the context of nature (β = 0.51, *p* < 0.01) and the cultural context (β = 0.65, *p* < 0.01). Perceived authenticity also has positive effects on the satisfaction for both the natural (β = 0.42, *p* < 0.01) and cultural (β = 0.20, *p* < 0.01) aspects. Tourists valued both nature and culture authenticity in the Chinese context. As a newly emerged phenomenon, performing arts act as an effective way to demonstrate local culture and history. The moderating effect of a performing art show was discussed with model comparison. Tourists who watched the performing arts show thought highly of the authenticity of the destination, especially regarding the cultural aspect.

Keywords: perceived authenticity; tourist experience; nature authenticity; culture recognition

1. Introduction

As one of the core themes in tourism research, authenticity is a construct with rich connotations [1]. It has been brought into tourism studies and has been widely discussed in different contexts for decades [2]. Authenticity is an attribute, a projection of attributes, or an existing state of being [3,4]. Some researchers advocated that the postmodern self is no longer concerned about "original work" and no longer takes inauthenticity seriously [5]. Others think modern works are more sophisticated in their ability and desire to experience authenticity [6]. Meanwhile, authenticity is used as a selling point by destinations in many ways to attract tourists. Eye-catching slogans such as "Malaysia Truly Asia" and "The Real Italy" are commonly presented by the media. Controversy remains around who can arbitrate authenticity, who has the power to endow a destination is authenticity [7], and what role authenticity plays in tourism.

As a socially constructed concept, it is necessary to identify the context when discussing the role authenticity plays. Research on culture-based tourism involves objective, constructive, existential and performance authenticity, as well as postmodern authenticity [8]. In the context of nature-based tourism, relevant studies usually involve only existential authenticity [9]. Researchers have emphasized the role that authenticity plays in culture tourism [10], while the natural landscape is taken for granted as authentic. Studies in the field of visual landscapes indicate that epitomizing nature (pristine wilderness) is a social construct [11]. The nature displayed to tourists may be decorated to cater to people's preferences, since pristine nature has a special kind of value [12]. Tourist's perceived nature authenticity is an issue worth exploring. In the meantime, a new form of tourism-related performing arts, derived from traditional "song-and-dance shows", has become

widespread in many nature-based spots in China as an effective way of destination rejuvenation [13]. Such modern performing arts are a medium for displaying local landscapes and culture. Despite the prosperity of the performing arts market, many scholars indicate that the performances presented are not reflective of the authentic local culture [10]. Whether these modern shows can help enhance tourist perceived authenticity of the destination is a controversial issue [14].

The primary goal of this study is to identify tourist-perceived natural and culture authenticity and to explore the role of perceived authenticity in the tourism context. Considering that the significance of authenticity is not only reflected in the perception of tourists, the impact of perceived authenticity on other indicators such as destination image and satisfaction is more meaningful in destination management. A structural equation model is developed based on a literature review, and a nature-based destination with rich ethnic culture in remote China is chosen for empirical research. In addition, since the influence of the prosperous industry of performing arts on tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination is controversial, a model comparison is conducted to test the impact of performing arts on perceived authenticity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Authenticity in the Tourism Context

Authenticity is a concept introduced to understand tourists' travel experiences at cultural heritage sites. The purest notion of authenticity refers to whether an object can be confirmed as real, genuine, or trustworthy [5]. Although in many cases, objective authenticity is not always what tourists desire. Objectivism has been widely criticized because it explains a limited facet of tourist experiences and ignores how tourists experience the objects, places, or events [15]. Studies from different perspectives were, therefore, introduced. Wang [5] classified the meanings of authenticity in the tourism context into objective, constructive, and existential authenticities. Objective authenticity focuses on the genuineness of objects and was termed as "cool" authentication by Cohen and Cohen [16]. Constructive authenticity defines something as authentic through the social construction of beliefs or perspectives. Existential authenticity focuses on the self-seeking process of tourist, and does not attempt to determine if something is authentic or not. As a dynamic, complex, and contradictory concept [8], the connotation of authenticity depends on the social context in which it is discussed [15]. Some scholars emphasize object authenticity only, while others focus on existential authenticity [17]. According to Chhabra, Healy, and Sills [18], people want to relive a traditional life through tourism. In certain cases, repetition is the only way visitors can experience the original since the originals have disappeared in history [19]. The "staged settings" in destinations act as media leading into the past to present traditional ways of life. In some circumstances, what is staged can be more authentic than the original. As Xie and Wall [20] indicated, it is the illusion of authenticity rather than a definitive reality that should be of concern. Oftentimes, tourists appreciate staged performances regardless of the genuineness of the settings [19]. In this study, we approach authenticity through the perspective of constructivism, because constructive authenticity is more advantageous in explaining the socially constructed nature of authenticity [1].

2.2. Perceived Nature and Culture Authenticity

Cohen [16] suggested that the environment has to be perceived by tourists to affect his/her experiential state. Perceived authenticity is the result of an individual's subjective evaluation of his/her experience [21]. Empirical research indicates that satisfaction of the experience in heritage destinations relies not on a sense of objective authenticity but rather on perceived authenticity [18]. Tourists search for authentic experiences in contexts such as museums and souvenir purchasing [22]. Tourism experts emphasize the role of perceived authenticity in cultural tourism. The authenticity of nature does not receive attention in this scope of studies, while nature is also a socially constructed and contingent phenomenon [23]. What we think of as epitomizing nature is a social construct [11]. Natural

phenomena are sociocultural phenomena in the sense that they are constructed through social interactions among members of a culture as they negotiate the meanings of nature and the environment. Landscape aesthetics and preferences play an important role in landscape studies [24]. Elliot [25] claimed that the additional value of pristine nature is not based on an inherent value, but is dependent on the human valuation of it. "Landscape" is the symbolic environment created by human acts of conferring meaning to nature and the environment [26]. Research on visual landscapes even provides technical assistance in the exploitation of the natural landscape [27]. For tourists, a more typical characterization is that when talking of nature, they are not talking about the ontological status of a separate entity or realm; it is the meaning that matters, which is socially constructed [26]. Researchers try to uncover the nature of authenticity, while the natural landscape is taken for granted as authentic in many cases. Since perceived authenticity is a more direct construct when discussing tourist experience, the perceived nature and culture authenticity of the destination are measured and discussed in this study.

2.3. Antecedents and Results of Perceived Authenticity

Cohen [16] highlights tourists' impression of a scene and emphasized the role of perceived authenticity. Pearce and Moscardo [28] take this idea one step further, arguing that it is not only people's perceptions that matter, but also people's needs or demands for authenticity. The value of perceived authenticity should be discussed in the interaction with other variables. Many scholars believe that authenticity can be perceived as an important driver of tourist behaviors as well as an antecedent/input of tourist experience [29,30]. Empirical research shows that authenticity has a positive effect on destination image [31] and satisfaction [32]. Aside from that, motivation as the impetus behind travel is commonly applied in tourist experience studies [33,34]. Cohen [16] phenomenologically placed tourist experiences into five modes through the motivations of tourists, which are recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential modes. Tourists in recreational and diversionary modes have no pretensions for authenticity. The existential modes are not as common in the context of mass sightseeing tourism. Hence, experiential motivation is considered here to explore the effect of motivation. To summarize, in order to explore the roles of perceived nature and culture authenticity in the tourism context, the present study proposed to test the relationships between experience motivation, perceived authenticity, destination image and satisfaction.

2.4. Performing Arts

Engaging in tourism activities significantly influences tourists' experiences. Tourists will evaluate tourism destinations based on the attributes and activities in the destination [35]. The practice of performing arts, in modern tourism, has become a newly flourishing tourism business [13]. With the development of photo-acoustic technology, modern performing arts can provide the audience with a stunning experience. The display of regional and cultural elements in performing arts can help promote the culture of a destination [36,37]. Meanwhile, whether these modern shows display authentic culture is a controversial issue. Kolas [10] claims that "ethnic performances present are not the 'authentic' local culture, but the 'themed culture' that most tourists expect," especially in the Chinese context. From a postmodern perspective, demonstrating staged authenticities to tourists through convenient settings is a better way to protect local fragile culture [38]. Tourists may have authentic experiences, even through staged authenticity [39]. Despite the prosperity of the performing arts market, many scholars indicate that the performances present are not the authentic local culture. The role of these performing arts is questioned in many ways. The effects of these performing arts on tourist perceived authenticity need to be discussed.

3. Hypotheses Development

According to the literature review above, a model is constructed to explore the role of perceived authenticity in the tourism context. Motivation, as the impetus behind travel, would affect tourists' perceived image of the destination [40] and satisfaction [41]. The following hypotheses were developed.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). *Experience motivation positively affects perceived nature image.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b). *Experience motivation positively affects perceived culture image.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Experience motivation positively affects satisfaction.*

The concept of authenticity has been considered as an antecedent of the tourist experience [42]. Perceived authenticity can help tourists form a good image of a destination [18,35]. The causal relationship between the perception of authenticity and satisfaction has been examined by a number of authors [35,43]. However, related researches are confined to the cultural and historical context. This study divides perceived authenticity and image into natural and cultural aspects. The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a). *Perceived nature authenticity positively affects perceived nature image.*

Hypothesis 3b (H3b). *Perceived culture authenticity positively affects perceived culture image.*

Hypothesis 4a (H4a). *Perceived nature authenticity positively affects satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 4b (H4b). *Perceived culture authenticity positively affects satisfaction.*

The significance of the destination image is well recognized. The perceived image directly affects other critical tourism constructs. It is accepted that a positive image helps to improve tourists' satisfaction [44,45]. The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5a (H5a). *Perceived nature image positively affects satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 5b (H5b). *Perceived culture image positively affects satisfaction.*

A tourist's experience within a destination is likely to modify their perceived authenticity, images and overall satisfaction [46]. The rise in performing art shows can improve tourists' interactions and participation in local activities [47]. Since the function of the performance arts has not been confirmed, tourists were divided into two groups according to whether they had seen an extra performing art show to identify the influence of these newly emerging shows. The performing art show, as a moderator, is tested in this study. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *Watching a performance art show moderates the relationships between perceived authenticity and other concepts such that the Perceived nature authenticity- > Perceived nature image path and Perceived culture authenticity- > Perceived culture image path will be stronger for tourists who watched the performing art show.*

4. Methods

Based on the literature review and hypothesis, we propose the existence of a correlation among tourist experience motivation, perceived nature and culture authenticity, perceived destination image, and satisfaction. A PLS-structural equation model method was used to test the model. To investigate the moderating effect of tourism performing arts, a Multi-

Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted. Then, using the independent sample T-test, the differences in the perceptions of these two groups were displayed and discussed.

4.1. Study Area

Jiuzhaigou is a national nature reserve in China that was listed in the World Natural Heritage in 1992. Jiuzhaigou is located in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Region, Sichuan Province (Figure 1). It lies on the edge between the Qinghai-Tibetan and Yangtze tectonic plates. The area has a sub-tropical to temperate monsoon climate, with a succession of zones cooling with altitude. It is a district of narrow forested valleys and lakes beneath steep snow-capped mountains on the rugged margins of the Tibetan plateau. Jiuzhaigou is a reserve of exceptional natural beauty with spectacular jagged alpine mountains soaring above coniferous forests around a fairyland landscape of crystal clear, strange-coloured blue, green and purplish pools, lakes, waterfalls, limestone terraces, caves and other beautiful features. In addition to the spectacular scenery, Jiuzhaigou is a culturally important place filled with Buddhist shrines, prayer flags, and chorten. Despite its unique culture, Jiuzhaigou is mostly visited because of its natural scenery. The display of local culture is limited in Jiuzhaigou's scenic spots. There are several performance theaters around the entrance of the scenic spot, whereby tourists can watch dancing and acrobatics displaying local arts. Of all these performances, Jiuzhai Eternal Love has received the highest level of investment in Sichuan Province, gaining the largest capacity of the original eco-culture tourism arts show since its opening in May 2014.

Figure 1. Location of the study area Jiuzhaigou.

4.2. Measurement Scales

Drawing from the instruments used to measure tourism motivations, the experiential aspect of the motivation was named as experiencing/experience [34,48,49], knowledge [50], learning [51,52], and novelty [53]. In consideration of the context of this study and case area, four commonly used items were generated from these studies to measure tourist experience motivations. The indicators are as follows: "learn something new" (M1), "experience a different way of life" (M2), "enrich my life" (M3), and "experience a different culture" (M4).

Perceived authenticity refers to perceptions of the objective settings in the destination. Physical artifacts were found to be crucial in the perceived authenticity of heritage sites [54]. Since the measurement of authenticity was context-specific, the indicators were generated from qualitative findings and scales adopted from the literature and previous work of the authors. The nature and culture aspects of perceived authenticity were measured, and the scale was developed based on the previous work of the authors, and interviews with tourists, local residents, and staff members of the scenic site. The final scale included the following indicators: "authentic Tibetan style houses" (CA1); "original architectural style buildings" (CA2); "traditional local ethnic customs" (CA3); "true Tibetan culture" (CA4); "the haizi (lakes) is a fascinating natural mystery" (NA1); "formation of the scenery is a natural process" (NA2); "the scenery is the product of the nature" (NA3); and "not affected by human disturbance" (NA4).

Perceived destination image is an attitudinal concept consisting of the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination [55]. This study focused on the cognitive aspect of image because it is directly measurable [56], and it can provide more concrete information regarding the uniqueness of a destination [57]. The perceived destination image is evaluated as a two-dimensional construct, including the natural and cultural environment [58]. The destination image was initially extracted from preview studies of our early works. Perceived culture image of tourists was measured with the following indicators: "rich Tibetan customs" (CI1); "strong culture atmosphere" (CI2); and "attractive featured buildings" (CI3). Perceived nature image of tourists was measured with "beautiful natural scenery" (NI1); "primitive ecological environment" (NI2); and "unique natural landscape" (NI3).

Satisfaction is a valid indicator by which to measure the quality of tourists' experience [33]. Tourists' satisfaction was measured with the following four items extracted from previous studies [35,44,59]: "satisfied with the travel experience" (S2); "fulfilled my expectations" (S3); and "will recommend to FnF" (S4).

Tourists' socio-demographic variables included gender, age, education, and income, and travel information included frequency of travel and travel companies. Each of the measures was back-translated as suggested. All of the scales were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was pilot-tested online, and the questionnaires were personally delivered and collected by the authors to ensure high-quality data.

4.3. Sampling and Data Collection

On the basis of a semi-random sampling, 929 tourists were surveyed. A total of 481 questionnaires were distributed at the exit of the Jiuzhaigou scenic spot to tourists who had just finished a tour at the spot but had not seen any performing arts. A total of 448 questionnaires were then distributed at the exit of the Jiuzhai Eternal Love show to tourists who had seen both the scenic spot and the show. Excluding 101 incomplete questionnaires, 828 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Common Method Bias

The data were collected with one questionnaire. Therefore, the relationship between variables may be affected by common method variance (CMV). As suggested by many researchers, to identify CMV, an assessment of whether a single source factor would account for all the manifest variables was taken. The result showed that no single source accounted

for a majority of the variance, indicating that the research model is robust to common method variance.

5.2. Profile of the Sample

Of the sample of 828 respondents, 50.6% were female and 49.4% were male. The distribution analysis of age indicated that the age of the respondents had a fairly normal distribution, ranging from 16 to 76 years. Regarding education, 75.24% of the respondents possessed a bachelor's or graduate degree. With regard to income, the distribution showed that 56.28% of the respondents reported a monthly salary of between CNY 3001 and 8000. For more than 80% of the respondents, this was the first time they had visited Jiuzhaigou. The demographic characteristics of the two groups are displayed in Table 1. The data do not show significant differences between the different groups.

Table 1. The profiles of the samples.

		No Show		Show		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender	Male	212	49.42	197	49.37	409	49.40
	Female	217	50.58	202	50.63	419	50.60
Age	16–20	12	2.80	9	2.26	21	2.54
	21–30	240	55.94	158	39.60	398	48.07
	31–40	93	21.68	97	24.31	190	22.95
	41–50	61	14.22	78	19.55	139	16.79
	>50	23	5.36	57	14.29	80	9.66
Education	Grade school	14	3.26	30	7.52	44	5.31
	High school	79	18.41	82	20.55	161	19.44
	College/university	308	71.79	251	62.91	559	67.51
	Graduate school	28	6.53	36	9.02	64	7.73
Monthly income (CNY)	<1000	36	8.39	19	4.76	55	6.64
	1001–3000	61	14.22	70	17.54	131	15.82
	3001–5000	147	34.27	138	34.59	285	34.42
	5001–8000	85	19.81	96	24.06	181	21.86
	8001–10,000	38	8.86	39	9.77	77	9.30
	10,001–20,000	27	6.29	17	4.26	44	5.31
	>20,000	32	7.46	12	3.01	44	5.31
	Missing data	3	0.70	8	2.01	11	1.33
Time of visit	First time	374	87.18	323	80.95	697	84.18
	More than once	55	12.82	76	19.05	131	15.82
Total		429	100	399	100	828	100

5.3. Analysis of the Reliability and Validity

In this study, an analysis of the dimensionality, reliability, and validity of the scale was carried out. A total of six latent variables were included in the structural model; each of these constructs was measured by three or four items. Such measurement items satisfied the required item quantity standards of the latent variables suggested by Bollen [60].

In the first phase of the measurement model analysis, the convergent validity was assessed. First, it was assessed by determining the factor loadings of each item and their significance. The factor loadings were all greater than 0.5 and significant. The convergent validity can also be assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, which should be higher than 0.5. As indicated by Table 2, the AVE of all the constructs was greater than 0.5. The convergent validity of each construct was thus satisfied.

By calculating the AVE and the correlation between each construct, Table 3 shows the discriminant validity of the scales.

Table 2. Analysis of the reliability and validity of the scales.

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived culture authenticity	0.887	0.922	0.748
Perceived culture image	0.841	0.905	0.760
Experience motivation	0.852	0.900	0.693
Perceived nature authenticity	0.752	0.843	0.574
Perceived nature image	0.845	0.906	0.763
Satisfaction	0.883	0.919	0.740

Table 3. Measure correlations, and square root of AVE.

Constructs	CA	CI	EM	NA	NI	S
Perceived culture authenticity	**0.865**					
Perceived culture image	0.619	**0.872**				
Experience motivation	0.422	0.367	**0.833**			
Perceived nature authenticity	0.524	0.419	0.427	**0.757**		
Perceived nature image	0.329	0.360	0.371	0.508	**0.873**	
Satisfaction	0.459	0.343	0.416	0.599	0.487	**0.860**

Note: Diagonals (in bold type) represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) while the other entries represent the correlations.

5.4. Structural Equation Model

A PLS-SEM approach was used in this research. Together, Table 4 and Figure 2 present the results from hypotheses testing. The standardized factor loading for all items was between 0.686 and 0.887. The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates the amount of variance explained by exogenous variables [61]. The model appears to have a medium explanatory ability, with R^2 ranging from 0.287 to 0.439. Moreover, the cross-validated redundancy (Q^2) values of all the endogenous constructs were well above zero (Table 5), indicating the predictive relevance of our model [62]. A bootstrapping procedure was used to evaluate the significance of the path coefficients [63]. The hypotheses are supported when zero is outside the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. Furthermore, Figure 2 shows the PLS results for all the samples. The model illustrates the relationship between tourist motivations, authenticity, image, and satisfaction. The path coefficients indicate that experience motivation was a stronger impetus for nature image ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.01$) than culture image ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.01$). The effect of experience motivation on satisfaction was also confirmed ($\beta = 0.124$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, H3 suggested that perceived authenticity would positively affect tourists' perception of the destination image. As shown in Figure 2, the effects were significantly positive on both the nature context ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.01$) and culture context ($\beta = 0.565$, $p < 0.01$). As can be seen, H4 indicated that perceived authenticity had a positive effect on satisfaction, which was also accepted. Nature authenticity had a stronger effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.365$, $p < 0.01$) than culture authenticity ($\beta = 0.168$, $p < 0.01$) in this case. The effect of nature image on satisfaction was confirmed ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.01$), while the effect of culture image was not significant ($\beta = -0.037$, $p = 0.41$). Thus, H1, H2, H3, and H4 are all supported, and H5 is partly supported.

Table 4. Results for direct relationships.

H	Path	Path Coefficients	t-Value	95%CILL	95%CIUL
H1a√	Experience motivation- > Perceived nature image	0.189	4.100	0.098	0.279
H1b√	Experience motivation- > Perceived culture image	0.128	3.536	0.059	0.201
H2√	Experience motivation- > Satisfaction	0.124	3.329	0.049	0.197
H3a√	Perceived nature authenticity- > Perceived nature image	0.428	10.298	0.346	0.510
H3b√	Perceived culture authenticity- > Perceived culture image	0.565	15.313	0.491	0.634
H4a√	Perceived nature authenticity- > Satisfaction	0.365	9.233	0.289	0.442
H4b√	Perceived culture authenticity- > Satisfaction	0.168	3.112	0.064	0.276
H5a√	Perceived nature image- > Satisfaction	0.214	5.797	0.144	0.291
H5b×	Perceived culture image- > Satisfaction	−0.037	0.829	−0.124	0.051
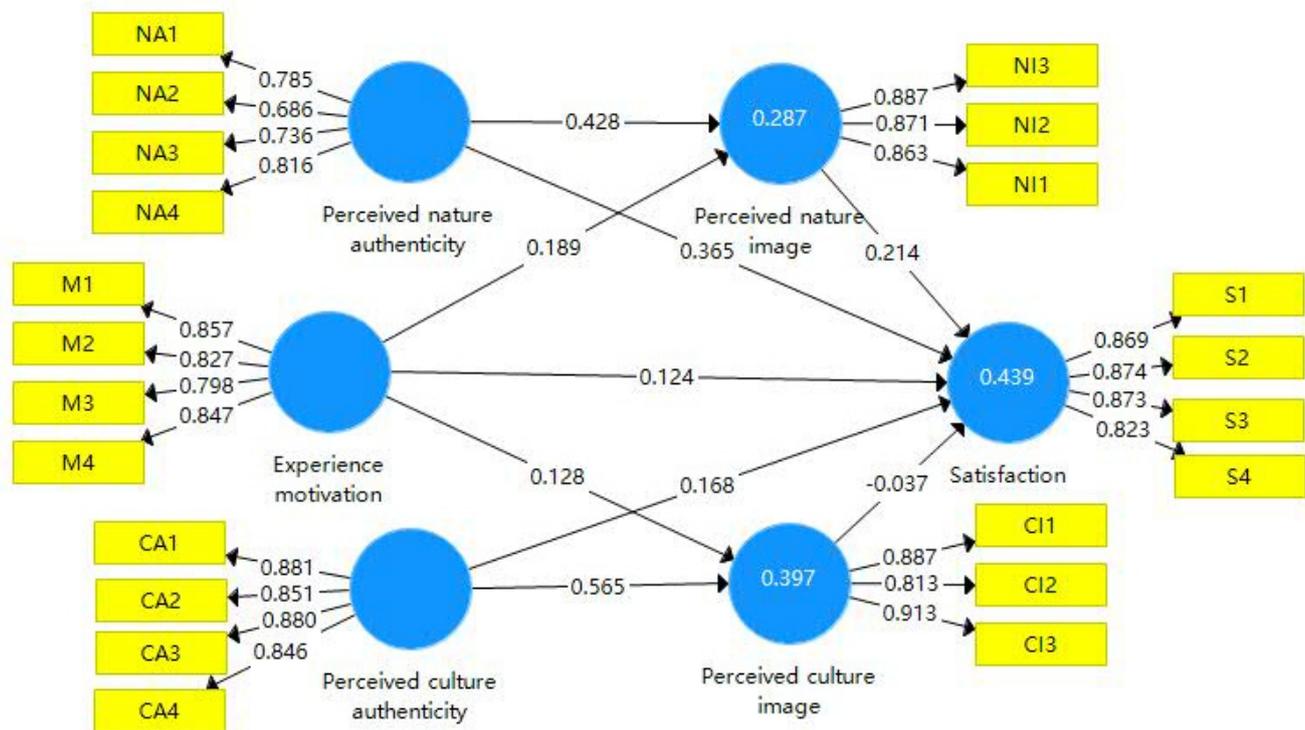
Figure 2. Structural model.

Table 5. Results of R^2, Q^2, and f^2.

Path	R^2	Q^2	f^2
Experience motivation- > Perceived nature image			0.041
Perceived nature authenticity- > Perceived nature image	0.287	0.280	0.210
Experience motivation- > Perceived culture image			0.022
Perceived culture authenticity- > Perceived culture image	0.397	0.391	0.435
Experience motivation- > Satisfaction			0.020
Perceived nature authenticity- > Satisfaction			0.138
Perceived culture authenticity- > Satisfaction			0.026
Perceived nature image- > Satisfaction			0.057
Perceived culture image- > Satisfaction	0.439	0.401	0.001

5.5. Tests of the Moderating Effect of Performing Arts as a Catalyst

The relationships between the two different groups were hypothesized to be mediated by watching the performing art show. Measurement invariance was tested for these two groups of tourists. Following the approach recommended by Vandenberg and Lance [64], four tests were conducted in the following order. Firstly, we took the unconstrained model as the baseline model; the model coefficients were freed so that the loading estimates and error variances could be computed. Next, the constraint was added so that the measurement weights would remain invariant across samples, and the model was re-estimated. Then, as the added constraint allowed the path coefficients to also remain invariant across subsamples, the model was examined again. Lastly, the covariances of the constructs were assumed to be invariant across groups. According to Anderson and Gerbing [65], the Chi-square difference test was conducted between the constrained and unconstrained models. The results of the Chi-square difference statistics indicated that the model was tau equivalent (Table 6). The structure of the model was robust across both groups, meaning the composition of all the latent variables and the path coefficients among these constructs had no between-group differences. The structural covariance model was significantly different (*p* = 0.000) from the baseline model. This means that the covariances

of the indicators in this model had a significant difference between groups. Even though H6 was rejected, the results of the model comparison indicated that tourists who attended the performing art show and those who did not had different perceptions of motivation, authenticity, destination image, and satisfaction.

Table 6. Results of model comparison.

Model	Hypothesis	DF	CMIN	*p*
Measurement weights	Assuming equal measurement weights between models	13	14.909	0.473
Structural weights	Assuming equal path coefficients between models	22	25.219	0.446
Structural covariances	Assuming equal covariances between models	26	88.124	0.000

Note: Taking the unconstrained model as the baseline model.

The mean values of the indicators were compared using the *t*-test. Overall, tourists who visited Jiuzhaigou had relatively high experience motivation and satisfaction. The perception of the cultural atmosphere gained quite different scores between groups. In order to test the differences between groups, an independent *t*-test was conducted. The results are shown in Table 7. Tourists with higher experience motivation were more likely to choose a performing arts show. Regarding the cultural aspect, the scores of tourists' perception of authenticity and image had significant differences. The mean difference of perceived culture authenticity was 0.38–0.56, and the mean difference of perceived culture image reached 0.58–0.68. Those who watched the show awarded much higher scores on every indicator of the scale. From the natural aspect, tourists who watched the show provided a higher score on most indicators of the authenticity scale (only one of the four indicators showed no difference). The scores of tourists' perceived nature image showed no difference between groups. Tourists who watched the show also gave higher scores on satisfaction indicators.

Table 7. Results of the *t*-test of the indicators.

| | N | Mean | SD | Levene Test | | *t*-Test | | | |
				F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (Two-Tail)	A−B
M1	429	4.08	1.00	1.67	0.20	−1.23	826.00	0.22	−0.08
	399	4.16	0.95						
M2	429	3.87	1.05	12.01	0.00	−4.41	822.19	0.00	−0.30
	399	4.17	0.91						
M3	429	4.09	1.02	7.85	0.01	−1.83	818.56	0.07	−0.12
	399	4.21	0.86						
M4	429	4.10	0.98	18.21	0.00	−3.49	801.69	0.00	−0.21
	399	4.31	0.77						
CA1	429	3.80	1.03	38.71	0.00	−7.70	776.54	0.00	−0.48
	399	4.28	0.74						
CA2	429	3.79	1.00	21.05	0.00	−7.16	800.44	0.00	−0.44
	399	4.23	0.77						
CA3	429	3.86	1.00	14.32	0.00	−6.17	801.27	0.00	−0.38
	399	4.24	0.78						
CA4	429	3.68	1.02	36.24	0.00	−8.83	794.74	0.00	−0.56
	399	4.24	0.78						
NA1	429	3.95	0.95	7.00	0.01	−4.82	811.68	0.00	−0.29
	399	4.24	0.77						
NA2	429	4.13	0.88	3.04	0.08	−2.70	826.00	0.01	−0.16
	399	4.29	0.76						
NA3	429	4.48	0.77	6.66	0.10	−0.74	826.00	0.46	−0.05
	399	4.52	0.63						
NA4	429	4.17	0.86	4.15	0.04	−4.17	826.00	0.06	−0.23
	399	4.40	0.72						

Table 7. *Cont.*

	N	Mean	SD	Levene Test		t-Test			
				F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (Two-Tail)	A−B
CI1	429	3.76	1.01	28.65	0.00	−8.42	809.24	0.00	−0.54
	399	4.30	0.81						
CI2	429	3.67	1.08	37.48	0.00	−8.67	805.37	0.00	−0.58
	399	4.25	0.85						
CI3	429	3.36	1.11	31.83	0.00	−9.78	812.44	0.00	−0.68
	399	4.05	0.90						
NI1	429	4.57	0.67	0.00	1.00	0.43	826.00	0.67	0.02
	399	4.55	0.66						
NI2	429	4.47	0.71	2.29	0.13	−1.29	826.00	0.20	−0.06
	399	4.53	0.69						
NI3	429	4.55	0.67	1.28	0.26	−0.31	826.00	0.76	−0.01
	399	4.57	0.63						
S1	429	4.18	0.81	0.24	0.63	−2.76	826.00	0.01	−0.15
	399	4.33	0.73						
S2	429	4.14	0.86	0.19	0.67	−3.80	826.00	0.00	−0.21
	399	4.35	0.73						
S3	429	4.17	0.85	1.28	0.26	−4.28	826.00	0.00	−0.23
	399	4.41	0.71						
S4	429	4.22	0.85	3.23	0.07	−4.36	826.00	0.00	−0.24
	399	4.46	0.70						

Note: "learn something new" (M1), "experience a different way of life" (M2), "enrich my life" (M3), and "experience a different culture" (M4), "authentic Tibetan style houses" (CA1); "original architectural style buildings" (CA2); "traditional local ethnic customs" (CA3); "true Tibetan culture" (CA4); "the haizi (lakes) is a fascinating natural mystery" (NA1); "formation of the scenery is a natural process" (NA2); "the scenery is the product of the nature" (NA3); and "not affected by human disturbance" (NA4),"rich Tibetan customs" (CI1); "strong culture atmosphere" (CI2); and "attractive featured buildings" (CI3). The nature image of tourists was measured with "beautiful natural scenery" (NI1); "primitive ecological environment" (NI2); and "unique natural landscape" (NI3), "a good choice to visit Jiuzhaigou" (S1); "satisfied with the travel experience" (S2); "fulfilled my expectations" (S3); and "will recommend to FnF" (S4).

6. Discussion and Implications

The role of tourism in modern times has been doubted. Some researchers advocated that the postmodern self no longer takes inauthenticity seriously [5]. Others think modern selves are more sophisticated in their ability and desire to experience authenticity [6]. According to Nyiri [66], in China, "authenticity has not been a concern of the modern public", and the preservation of the authentic environment against commercialization is much weaker in China than in the West. On the other hand, Chinese tourists' authenticity-seeking process has been explored [67]. The results of practical study shows that tourists value both nature and culture authenticity in the Chinese context. The relationships among experience motivation, perceived authenticity, perceived destination image, and satisfaction were tested using a PLS-SEM model. The results indicate that perceived authenticity has a positive effect on destination image and tourists' satisfaction. Tourists tend to have a better impression when they think the natural landscape and culture is authentic. Profound regional cultural connotations and authentic natural beauty play a critical role in the success of the destination.

Previous studies on perceived authenticity only focused on the cultural and historical context [22]. When discussing constructive authenticity, the natural landscape is taken for granted as authentic. The construct of perceived nature authenticity was proposed in this study. Theories of visual landscape and landscape restoration were borrowed to explain the existence of perceived authenticity in the natural context. The results of this study indicate that perceived nature authenticity and image have an overwhelmingly stronger effect on tourists' satisfaction. Originality or authenticity accounts for a great deal in value assessments; when tourists think of a landscape as pristine wilderness, they tend to award a higher evaluation on the scenery. Tourists speak highly of the

natural scenery of Jiuzhaigou, yet the demonstration of culture and history falls short of the tourists' expectations. Nevertheless, tourists still feel satisfied with the experience because the primary motivation to visit these destinations is to see the beautiful natural landscape [68]. The stunning natural landscape may cause tourists to overlook the rich cultural connotations in destinations such as Jiuzhaigou.

With the rapid change in the tourist market, new tourism products have emerged and have a profound impact on tourist experience. Using performing art show to demonstrate local culture and history is a special phenomenon of the combination of creative industry with tourism. The model comparison results indicated that the structure of the model is robust between the two groups and the model is tau equivalent. Findings indicate that increasing tourists' involvement in activities such as watching performing arts improves tourists' experience evaluation, which is consistent with previous studies [35,47]. The group comparison result of this study shows that tourists who watched the performing art show think highly of the authenticity of the destination, especially in terms of the cultural aspect. Tourists who watched the show also gave higher scores on satisfaction. Although watching a performing art show did not moderate the relationships between perceived authenticity and other constructs, it helps to enhance tourists' sense of place and cultural identity of a place [69]. It can also serve as a destination marketing tool, assisting in destination selection [70] and helping to revitalize the local economy.

Several limitations provide potential avenues for future research. This study explores perceived nature authenticity of tourists from a constructivist perspective. Future research should seek to grasp the profound connotation of nature authenticity through theoretical analysis. The case study is based on two groups that have s similar demographic characteristics to facilitate a comparative study. The validity of results may still be affected by unobserved heterogeneity, which is hard to detect. Longitudinal studies should be carried out in the future to confirm the results of this study. Besides, both groups provided extremely high scores for nature image (around 4.5 with 5 as the highest score), which is case-related since Jiuzhaigou is one of the most beautiful natural landscape resorts in China. Tourists' satisfaction is mainly affected by their perception of the natural environment. The results should be tested for other kinds of destinations.

7. Conclusions

Based on studies on authenticity in the tourism context, tourists value the authenticity of both natural and cultural aspects of the destination attractions. As argued above, authenticity should be discussed not only in the context of cultural tourism. Tourists' perceived authenticity of both natural and cultural aspects has been discussed. Tourists' perception of authenticity regarding the natural landscape is also a construct and may also be staged [26]. We proposed the concept of perceived nature authenticity to enrich the connotation of authenticity. Theories on visual landscapes and landscape restoration were utilised to explain the existence of perceived authenticity in the natural context. The relationships between perceived authenticity and other constructs of tourists' experience were tested. A destination with the natural landscape as its main attraction was chosen to test the model. Tourists' perceived authenticity had a positive effect on their perceived image of the destination and overall satisfaction. The result also indicates that nature authenticity and image have an overwhelmingly stronger effect on tourists' satisfaction. Modern tourists are more sophisticated in their ability and desire to experience authenticity. Additionally, they are not easy to be deceived with "fake" products [32]. Authenticity should not only be a marketing gimmick since tourists attracted by these slogans are truly seeking an authentic experience.

The group-comparison result of this study showed that tourists who watched the performing arts show thought highly of the destination's authenticity, especially regarding the cultural aspect. Such a positive perception provides these destinations with an optimal means to transmit local culture [71] and to improve tourists' experience. The performing arts can also act as an attraction to help revitalize local economies, and preserve

cultural values by enhancing the image of a destination [37]. The benefits of performing arts may strengthen a place's cultural identity although it is overlooked as a tool for destination marketing.

References

1. Rickly, J.M. A review of authenticity research in tourism: Launching the Annals of Tourism Research Curated Collection on authenticity. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2022**, *92*, 103349. [CrossRef]
2. Stepchenkova, S.; Park, H. Authenticity orientation as an attitude: Scale construction and validation. *Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *83*, 104249. [CrossRef]
3. Steiner, C.J.; Reisinger, Y. Understanding existential authenticity. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2006**, *33*, 299–318. [CrossRef]
4. Andrade-Matos, M.B.; Richards, G.; Azevedo Barbosa, M.D.L. Rethinking authenticity through complexity paradigm. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2022**, *92*, 103348. [CrossRef]
5. Wang, N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **1999**, *26*, 349–370. [CrossRef]
6. Chambers, E. From authenticity to significance: Tourism on the frontier of culture and place. *Futures* **2009**, *41*, 353–359. [CrossRef]
7. Chhabra, D. Defining Authenticity and Its Determinants: Toward an Authenticity Flow Model. *J. Travel Res.* **2005**, *44*, 64–73. [CrossRef]
8. Zhang, T.; Yin, P. Testing the structural relationships of tourism authenticities. *J. Destin. Mark. Manag.* **2020**, *18*, 100485. [CrossRef]
9. Rickly-Boyd, J.M. Existential Authenticity: Place Matters. *Tour. Geogr.* **2013**, *15*, 680–686. [CrossRef]
10. Kolas, A. *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangrila*; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2007.
11. Cronon, W. The trouble with wilderness, or, getting back to the wrong nature. In *The Great New Wilderness Debate*; University of Georgia Press: Athens, GA, USA, 1998; pp. 471–499.
12. Brook, I. Restoring landscapes: The authenticity problem. Earth Surface Processes and Landforms. *J. Br. Geomorphol. Res. Group* **2006**, *31*, 1600–1605.
13. Qin, Q.; Wall, G.; Liu, X. Government roles in stimulating tourism development: A case from Guangxi, China. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2011**, *16*, 471–487. [CrossRef]
14. Pearce, P.L.; Wu, M.Y. Entertaining international tourists: An empirical study of an iconic site in China. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* **2018**, *42*, 772–792. [CrossRef]
15. Cole, S. Beyond authenticity and commodification. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2007**, *34*, 943–960. [CrossRef]
16. Cohen, E. A phenomenology of tourist experiences. *Sociology* **1979**, *13*, 179–201. [CrossRef]
17. Brown, L. Tourism: A catalyst for existential authenticity. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2013**, *40*, 176–190. [CrossRef]
18. Chhabra, D.; Healy, R.; Sills, E. Staged authenticity and heritage tourism. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2003**, *30*, 702–719. [CrossRef]
19. Zhou, Q.B.; Zhang, J.; Zhang, H.; Ma, J. A structural model of host authenticity. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2015**, *55*, 28–45. [CrossRef]
20. Xie, P.F.; Wall, G. Visitors' perceptions of authenticity at cultural attractions in Hainan, China. *Int. J. Tour. Res.* **2002**, *4*, 353–366. [CrossRef]
21. Belhassen, Y.; Caton, K.; Stewart, W.P. The search for authenticity in the pilgrim experience. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2008**, *35*, 668–689. [CrossRef]
22. Jin, L.; Xiao, H.; Shen, H. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums. *J. Destin. Mark. Manag.* **2020**, *18*, 100493. [CrossRef]
23. Demeritt, D. What is the 'social construction of nature'? A typology and sympathetic critique. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* **2002**, *26*, 767–790. [CrossRef]
24. Carlson, A. On aesthetically appreciating human environments. *Philos. Geogr.* **2001**, *4*, 9–24. [CrossRef]
25. Elliot, R. *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration*; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2008.

26. Greider, T.; Garkovich, L. Landscapes: The social construction of nature and the environment. *Rural. Sociol.* **1994**, *59*, 1–24. [CrossRef]
27. Val, G.D.; Atauri, J.; Lucio, J.D. Relationship between landscape visual attributes and spatial pattern indices: A test study in Mediterranean-climate landscapes. *Landsc. Urban Plan.* **2006**, *77*, 393–407.
28. Pearce, P.L.; Moscardo, G.M. The concept of authenticity in tourist experiences. *Aust. N. Z. J. Sociol.* **1986**, *22*, 121–132. [CrossRef]
29. Poria, Y.; Reichel, A.; Biran, A. Heritage site management: Motivations and expectations. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2006**, *33*, 162–178. [CrossRef]
30. Yeoman, I.; Brass, D.; McMahon-Beattie, U. Current issue in tourism: The authentic tourist. *Tour. Manag.* **2007**, *28*, 1128–1138. [CrossRef]
31. Rahman, A.; Ahmed, T.; Sharmin, N.; Akhter, M. Online destination image development: The role of authenticity, source credibility, and involvement. *J. Tour. Q.* **2021**, *3*, 1–20.
32. Tian, D.; Wang, Q.; Law, R.; Zhang, M. Influence of cultural identity on tourists' authenticity perception, tourist satisfaction, and traveler loyalty. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 6344. [CrossRef]
33. Lee, T.H. A structural model to examine how destination image, attitude, and motivation affect the future behavior of tourists. *Leis. Sci.* **2009**, *31*, 215–236. [CrossRef]
34. Needham, M.D.; Rollins, R.B.; Ceurvorst, R.L.; Wood, C.J.B.; Grimm, K.E.; Dearden, P. Motivations and normative evaluations of summer visitors at an alpine ski area. *J. Travel Res.* **2011**, *50*, 669–684. [CrossRef]
35. Lu, L.; Chi, C.G.; Liu, Y. Authenticity, involvement, and image: Evaluating tourist experiences at historic districts. *Tour. Manag.* **2015**, *50*, 85–96. [CrossRef]
36. Guetzkow, J. *How the Arts Impact Communities*; Princeton University Centre for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2002; pp. 7–8.
37. Liu, Y.-D. Cultural events and cultural tourism development: Lessons from the European Capitals of Culture. *Eur. Plan. Stud.* **2014**, *22*, 498–514. [CrossRef]
38. Edelheim, J.R. Tourist's experience of place. *Tour. Cult. Commun.* **2005**, *6*, 67.
39. Park, E.; Choi, B.K.; Lee, T.J. The role and dimensions of authenticity in heritage tourism. *Tour. Manag.* **2019**, *74*, 99–109. [CrossRef]
40. Madden, K.; Rashid, B.; Zainol, N.A. Beyond the motivation theory of destination image. *Tour. Hosp. Manag.* **2016**, *22*, 247–264. [CrossRef]
41. Baloglu, S.; McCleary, K.W. A model of destination image formation. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **1999**, *26*, 868–897. [CrossRef]
42. Zatori, A.; Smith, M.K.; Puczko, L. Experience-involvement, memorability and authenticity: The service provider's effect on tourist experience. *Tour. Manag.* **2018**, *67*, 111–126. [CrossRef]
43. Chen, C.-F.; Chen, F.-S. Experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions for heritage tourists. *Tour. Manag.* **2010**, *31*, 29–35. [CrossRef]
44. Bigne, J.E.; Sanchez, M.I.; Sanchez, J. Tourism image, evaluation variables and after purchase behaviour: Inter-relationship. *Tour. Manag.* **2001**, *22*, 607–616. [CrossRef]
45. Li, T.T.; Liu, F.; Soutar, G.N. Experiences, post-trip destination image, satisfaction and loyalty: A study in an ecotourism context. *J. Destin. Mark. Manag.* **2021**, *19*, 100547. [CrossRef]
46. Yang, L.; Wall, G. Authenticity in ethnic tourism: Domestic tourists' perspectives. *Curr. Issues Tour.* **2009**, *12*, 235–254. [CrossRef]
47. Yang, L.; Wall, G.; Smith, S.L.J. Ethnic tourism development: Chinese Government Perspectives. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2008**, *35*, 751–771. [CrossRef]
48. Lee, S.-H.; Graefe, A.R.; Li, C.-L. The effects of specialization and gender on motivations and preferences for site attributes in paddling. *Leis. Sci.* **2007**, *29*, 355–373. [CrossRef]
49. Park, S.H.; Hsieh, C.-M.; McNally, R. Motivations and marketing drivers of Taiwanese island tourists: Comparing across Penghu, Taiwan and Phuket, Thailand. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2010**, *15*, 305–317. [CrossRef]
50. Kim, S.S.; Kim, M.; Park, J.; Guo, Y. Cave tourism: Tourists' characteristics, motivations to visit, and the segmentation of their behavior. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2008**, *13*, 299–318. [CrossRef]
51. Pearce, P.L.; Lee, U.-I. Developing the travel career approach to tourist motivation. *J. Travel Res.* **2005**, *43*, 226–237. [CrossRef]
52. Park, D.-B.; Yoon, Y.-S. Segmentation by motivation in rural tourism: A Korean case study. *Tour. Manag.* **2009**, *30*, 99–108. [CrossRef]
53. Mehmetoglu, M. Typologising nature-based tourists by activity—Theoretical and practical implications. *Tour. Manag.* **2007**, *28*, 651–660. [CrossRef]
54. Waitt, G. Consuming heritage: Perceived historical authenticity. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2000**, *27*, 835–862. [CrossRef]
55. Echtner, C.M.; Ritchie, J.R.B. The meaning and measurement of destination image. *J. Tour. Stud.* **1991**, *2*, 2–12.
56. Walmsley, D.J.; Young, M. Evaluative images and tourism: The use of personal constructs to describe the structure of destination images. *J. Travel Res.* **1998**, *36*, 65–69. [CrossRef]
57. Baloglu, S.; Brinberg, D. Affective images of tourism destinations. *J. Travel Res.* **1997**, *35*, 11–15. [CrossRef]
58. Wang, C.-Y.; Hsu, M.K. The relationships of destination image, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions: An integrated model. *J. Travel Tour. Mark.* **2010**, *27*, 829–843. [CrossRef]
59. Chen, C.-F.; Tsai, D. How destination image and evaluative factors affect behavioral intentions? *Tour. Manag.* **2007**, *28*, 1115–1122. [CrossRef]

60. Bollen, K.A. A new incremental fit index for general structural equation models. *Sociol. Methods Res.* **1989**, *17*, 303–316. [CrossRef]
61. Schreiber, J.B.; Nora, A.; Stage, F.K.; Barlow, E.A.; King, J. Reporting Structural Equation Modeling and Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results: A Review. *J. Educ. Res.* **2006**, *99*, 323–338. [CrossRef]
62. Fornell, C.; Larcker, D.F. Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *J. Mark. Res.* **1981**, *18*, 39–50. [CrossRef]
63. Hair, J.; Sarstedt, M.; Ringle, C.M.; Mena, J.A. An assessment of the use of partial least squares structural equation modeling in marketing research. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **2012**, *40*, 414–433. [CrossRef]
64. Vandenberg, R.J.; Lance, C.E. A review and synthesis of the measurement invariance literature: Suggestions, practices, and recommendations for organizational research. *Organ. Res. Methods* **2000**, *3*, 4–70. [CrossRef]
65. Anderson, J.C.; Gerbing, D.W. Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychol. Bull.* **1988**, *27*, 5–24. [CrossRef]
66. Nyíri, P. *Scenic Spots: Chinese Tourism, the State, and Cultural Authority*; University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, USA, 2006.
67. Cai, W.; Gebbels, M.; Wan-Zainal-Shukri, W.H. Performing authenticity: Independent Chinese travellers' tourism dining experiences in Europe. *Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *86*, 104339. [CrossRef]
68. Jin, S.; Yang, J.; Wang, E.; Liu, J. The influence of high-speed rail on ice–snow tourism in northeastern China. *Tour. Manag.* **2020**, *78*, 104070. [CrossRef]
69. Huang, Y.; Scott, N.; Ding, P.; Cheng, D. Impression of Liusanjie: Effect of mood on experience and satisfaction. *Int. J. Tour. Res.* **2012**, *14*, 91–102. [CrossRef]
70. Yang, J.; Yang, R.; Chen, M.H.; Su, C.H.; Zhi, Y.; Xi, J. Effects of rural revitalization on rural tourism. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *47*, 35–45. [CrossRef]
71. Pradana, G.Y.K. Implications of commodified Parwa Shadow Puppet performance for tourism in Ubud, Bali. *J. Bus. Hosp. Tour.* **2018**, *4*, 70–79. [CrossRef]