A Study on the Effect of Authenticity on Heritage Tourists' Mindful Tourism Experience: The Case of the Forbidden City

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Abstract: While heritage tourism has been explored widely in the tourism literature, there remains a need to further understand the antecedent variables that influence tourist experiences in such a context. This study applied mindfulness theory, investigating the effect of authenticity and mindfulness on the tourist experience and how the tourist experience influenced satisfaction and loyalty. A structural model was used with eight proposed hypotheses based on data collected in the spring of 2021 from 363 Chinese visitors to the Forbidden City. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were employed, enabling variable relations to be tested. Results revealed that authenticity significantly influenced mindfulness, and mindfulness significantly influenced tourists' experience. Furthermore, two dimensions of tourists' experience influenced satisfaction and satisfaction influenced loyalty.

Keywords: heritage tourism; authenticity; mindfulness; tourist experience; resilience

1. Introduction

Experiencing heritage has increasingly become a popular travel motivation [1]. Heritage tourism enables visitors to interact with representations of past places and people [2,3]. Heritage sites are often re-creations of past environments, and authenticity is vital for heritage tourism [4]. Authenticity can be used to describe an object that is genuine, accurate, or real [5]. Authenticity can be beneficial in tourism as it can be used to provide quality services at a lower cost [6]. However, this approach ignores how tourists perceive authenticity and what makes heritage tourists' experiences more valuable. Authenticity is one variable that influences mindfulness, with mindfulness defined as the active processing of new information in one's environment [7]. Moscardo [8] stated that mindfulness could be stimulated by the perceived or observed authenticity of the features of an experience. Zheng et al. [9] found that increased authenticity was associated with enhanced subjective well-being owing to greater mindfulness.

Mindfulness is associated with more effective learning and positive appraisal [10]. Value is created through experiences when people interact with their environments [11]. Kang and Gretzel [12] noted that tourist experiences have learning, enjoyment, and escape dimensions and also determined that mindfulness can improve tourist experiences. Learning experience refers to the acquisition of new information and skills [13], enjoyment experience describes the extent that tourist experiences are considered enjoyable [14], and escape experience refers to tourist immersion in another environment different from daily life [13]. However, little empirical research about mindfulness is related to enhanced tourist experiences or heritage tourism.

Authenticity is a valuable construct that can appeal to tourists who want to visit heritage destinations, and it has been investigated for its value, classification, and effects [15].

While authenticity can influence mindfulness [8], this has not been examined empirically. Thus, this study is the first to empirically explore perceived authenticity as an antecedent variable of mindfulness. Similarly, the influence of mindful tourists' experiences has not been subject to widespread empirical research and needs to be explored further in a heritage tourism context.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the relationships between perceived authenticity, mindfulness, and tourist experience in heritage tourism. To be more specific, the current study investigated the role of authenticity as a tool to enhance heritage tourists' mindful tourism experience. Given that tourist experience is often relevant to satisfaction and loyalty, this research also examines the influence of tourist experience on satisfaction and the effect of satisfaction on loyalty in a heritage tourism context. To fill this research gap, the following research questions were addressed in this study: Is there a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and mindfulness? Is there a significant relationship between mindfulness and the dimensions of heritage tourists' experiences (i.e., learning, enjoyment, and escape experiences)? Is there a significant relationship between heritage tourists' experience dimensions and satisfaction? Does satisfaction significantly influence loyalty, given the variables employed in this study? These research questions guided the inquiry into the relationship between perceived authenticity, mindfulness, heritage tourists' experience, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. Moreover, as previous studies have emphasized mindfulness practice to be a medium for providing mental relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, and given that mindfulness served to increase subjective well-being during lockdowns and can improve resilience in the workplace [16], the current study attempted to apply mindfulness theory to investigate the role of mindfulness as a means of enhancing tourists' experiences at a heritage site. Therefore, this study sought to learn from the tourism experiences of heritage tourists as a direction for the post-pandemic tourism industry. Through this, the current study aims to provide practical suggestions for tourism practitioners to contribute to tourism resilience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Heritage Tourism

Cultural heritage includes the tangible and intangible values of historical and cultural sites [1–4]. Given that the values and judgments of societies change with time and social development, cultural heritage perspectives vary over time [4,17]. Heritage tourism describes tourists who visit cultural settings or sites considered relevant to heritage and is a growing tourism sector [18]. Notable heritage tourism motivations include experiencing the past and experiencing authenticity [2,3].

Historical, natural, and cultural values can attract tourists and have resulted in more trips with cultural or heritage components [3]. Heritage tourism can educate people about preserving and protecting heritage sites [3]. Some destinations became popular with tourists after becoming UNESCO World Heritage Sites [17]. While this can have positive results, the popularity of a heritage tourism site can bring negative consequences. Commercialization can erode the authenticity of heritage tourism destinations [19]. Therefore, it is necessary to promote sustainable development by understanding heritage tourism more deeply, maximizing the positive effects, and minimizing adverse impacts.

Given its popularity, prior studies have focused on various aspects of heritage tourism. Topics explored include cultural site development [20], authenticity [1], memorable tourism experiences [21], and motivation [19]. More recently, Jurlin [22] determined that not only natural and cultural heritage but also cultural activities are important factors in making the tourism industry more resilient in a post-pandemic world. Similarly, Bui et al. [23] stated that authentic handcraft village production and the establishment of homestays in a heritage town played significant roles in providing authentic local experiences for tourists. Thus, authentic heritage sites can offer sustainable experiences to tourists while enhancing development in the community. By sharing authenticity and local traditions, heritage

sites can enable local communities to adapt well to further tourism development and promote resilience.

2.2. Authenticity

Authenticity concerning tourist objects and destinations, along with tourist experiences, has been previously studied [24,25]. In heritage tourism, authenticity could be considered the most essential feature of a destination [4]. This is due to tourists seeking to experience authenticity and because sites relate past and present places and stories [3,20]. Authenticity has both demand- and supply-side characteristics [20]. Given that tourists or destination communities may be unable to use existing conceptions of authenticity identified in tourism research, each party might develop a subjective model more suited to their needs. Thus, Cohen [15] noted that authenticity could not be objectively defined and should be a negotiated term.

Wang [26] divided authenticity into three types: objective, constructed, and existential. Objective authenticity refers to substantiated original artifacts and tourist sites (e.g., what is affirmed through expert assessment). Constructed authenticity refers to people's attributions to an object or attraction and relates to tourists' expectations and ideas of authenticity. Existential authenticity refers to connections between people's experiences and themselves and other people after visiting a tourist destination or through their own experience.

Cohen [15] contended that produced or restored objects can be treated as authentic. Constructed authenticity can be defined as a result of socially constructed interpretation based on perceivable tourism experience attributes [15,22]. External indicators such as service and the general atmosphere around tourists may contribute to how destination authenticity is assessed [27]. Thus, the concept of constructed authenticity, also known as "perceived authenticity", was adopted for this study. While researchers have examined authenticity in different tourism settings, such as ecotourism [25], heritage tourism [28,29], and rural tourism [30], research on how authenticity affects heritage tourists' experiences is minimal.

2.3. Mindfulness

Langer [31] described mindfulness as "a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the context and content of information" (p. 289). The concentration of attention and greater awareness based on attending to the present moment are characteristics of mindfulness [8]. Mindfulness theory describes two ways of processing information: a "mindful" way involving greater openness and awareness in the present moment and a "mindless" way that lacks such attributes, relying on past distinctions [7]. Mindfulness has been associated with heightened task concentration and improved psychological and physiological outcomes [7]. A key feature of mindfulness is awareness of psychological experiences [32]. Researchers have found that mindfulness increases or enhances tourist satisfaction [33], memory recall [34], interpretive experiences [35,36], and tourist education [35,36].

Mindfulness enables tourists to become more aware of their behavior, and this can increase appreciation of sites visited by tourists [35]. Increased environmental awareness leads to contextual information about a setting becoming more salient [31], influencing how information is assessed [32]. Thus, mindfulness has been associated with interpretation, illustrating the effectiveness and importance of interpretation in terms of people's experiences and ability to learn and remember what they encounter [36]. Mindfulness has also been investigated as a critical strategy in the tourism industry to minimize the negative impacts of COVID-19 on tourists and employees in the field [37]. Looking to the future, mindfulness can also serve to generate resilience and sustainability practices in the tourism industry in a post-pandemic world [38,39].

2.4. Tourist Experience

Experience describes the involvement one has through interactions with the environment in a particular site [11]. Tourist experiences can include elements of entertainment, education, and escapism and, in the experience economy, consumers actively participate in making their own experiences rather than relying heavily on others for greater understanding [40].

The quality and diversity of the experiences supplied by the destination and perceived by tourists affect the value of the destination for tourism stakeholders, such as travelers, destination marketers, local inhabitants, and policymakers [40]. Thus, research about tourists' experiences has also sought to increase understanding of heritage tourist behavior. Three aspects of tourist experience have been acknowledged as experience dimensions in tourism studies: learning experience, enjoyment experience, and escape experience [12,41]. Learning experience refers to the visitor's experience of acquiring new information and skills [13]. The enjoyment experience is the extent to which the tourist experience is considered enjoyable in addition to its utilitarian value [14]. Escape experience refers to tourists' experience of being immersed in the destination environment and getting away from daily life [13]. Most recently, An et al. [41] examined how emotional solidarity influences volunteer tourists' experiences in the field of volunteer tourism. The study found that all dimensions of tourist experience (i.e., learning, enjoyment, and escape experience) were significantly influenced by emotional solidarity.

2.5. Tourist Satisfaction

Truong and Foster [42] defined satisfaction as the disparity between what is anticipated by the tourist and the perception of the performance by the destination of a tourist experience. Consumers typically perceive satisfaction by comparing the differences between expectations and performance before and after consumption [43]. In marketing and tourism, satisfaction has been thoroughly researched [1,44].

Tourist satisfaction can influence destination selections, product and service consumption, and revisit intention [45,46]. Therefore, destination managers need to provide satisfying experiences for tourists and recognize that satisfaction is fundamental in evaluating the performance of tourism attractions, destination products, and services [47]. Tourists experience satisfaction when expectations are exceeded [48] and dissatisfaction when expectations are not met by a destination [27]. In heritage tourism, Rehman et al. [49] found significant positive effects for tourist quality experience, destination image, and destination loyalty on tourist satisfaction. In a similar vein, Rasoolimanesh et al. [21] confirmed that tourists who visited the heritage city of Kashan, Iran, seemed to be satisfied with their tourism experiences, and their satisfaction significantly and positively influenced loyalty.

2.6. Loyalty

Loyalty measures the preference of consumers for a product or service [46]. Previous studies have understood repurchasing or recommendations to others as consumer loyalty with a positive attitude [50]. In tourism, tourist loyalty is shown by revisiting destinations and recommending destinations to others [21,51].

Loyalty is a crucial driver of organizational competition and is relevant to hospitality and tourism experiences [52]. McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng [53] argued that there are three types of tourist loyalty: vertical, horizontal, and experiential. Vertical loyalty describes loyalty to different elements of the tourism system, horizontal loyalty refers to loyalty at various destinations or firms, and experiential loyalty describes loyalty to preferred experience types or destinations. Quadri-Felitti and Fiore [54] concluded that satisfaction influenced destination loyalty. Similarly, Kolar and Zabkar [55] and Bryce et al. [2] confirmed that authenticity influenced visitor loyalty.

2.7. Hypotheses

2.7.1. Effect of Authenticity on Mindfulness

Langer [7] noted that authenticity is perceived as an element of experiences or objects and can stimulate mindfulness. Moscardo [36] indicated that the variable authenticity can promote mindfulness. Subsequent research has linked the two variables together more succinctly.

Woods and Moscardo [56] identified crucial attributes of mindful experiences with wildlife, one of which was perceived authenticity. Pearce [57] described authenticity as being able to be processed mindfully by tourists. Pearce [57,58] further stated that mindful processing can enhance understanding of how site authenticity is accepted or questioned. Moscardo [8] noted that mindfulness has been linked to authenticity as mindfulness can be stimulated by perceived or observed authenticity, and "Authenticity" was noted as a factor of place associated with mindfulness. In other words, the heritage site, if associated with authenticity, can lead visitors to experience mindfulness. Pearce [58] noted that authenticity had become linked to tourism concepts, but further research is needed.

Authenticity has been noted as an antecedent of tourist satisfaction, although how it influences tourists' experiences can be further researched [1]. Loureiro, Breazeale, and Radic [59] noted that perceived authenticity directly influenced the perceived value of the travel experience. Zheng et al. [9] indicated that psychological authenticity preceded mindfulness in a study about subjective well-being. These researchers found that greater authenticity was associated with higher subjective well-being through higher mindfulness.

Authenticity can precede mindfulness [8,36]. Thus, as described in mindfulness theory [7], it was the antecedent variable in this study. Therefore, based on the reviewed work, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Authenticity has a positive effect on mindfulness.*

2.7.2. Effect of Mindfulness on the Tourist Experience

Mindfulness has been described as a relaxed, nonevaluative awareness of one's experience [32]. Mindfulness is associated with positive outcomes, including more effective learning, improved mental and physical health, greater creativity, and positive affective or emotional responses to situations [10]. Carson and Langer [10] noted that being actively engaged and sensitive to perspective and context in the present moment are characteristics of mindfulness.

Mindful tourists are expected to have enjoyable visits [35]. Mindfulness can help people to achieve a better understanding of different contexts and can be beneficial in enhancing tourists' experiences [8,36]. Dutt and Ninov [34] noted that mindfulness positively correlated with tourists' memories of their experiences. Loureiro, Breazeale, and Radic [59] indicated that mindfulness moderated dimensions of experience, including escapism, and can significantly influence the tourist experience.

Mindfulness promotes informed and controlled behavioral processing, which can enhance psychological and physiological outcomes [31]. Experience evaluation by tourists will vary depending on the level of mindfulness [60]. Highly mindful tourists can focus well on present experiences [32], providing more opportunities for escape. Mindfulness had a positive effect on learning, enjoyment, and escape experience in Kang and Gretzel's [12] study. Such results are supported by other researchers who have indicated that mindfulness can result in meaningful tourist experiences [61,62]. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Mindfulness has a positive effect on the learning experience.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Mindfulness has a positive effect on the enjoyment experience.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Mindfulness has a positive effect on the escape experience.*

2.7.3. Effect of Tourist Experience on Satisfaction

Lee et al. [27] noted that heritage destination managers should provide satisfying experiences to tourists. The importance of satisfaction and visitor experience continues to be relevant to all tourist experiences. Researchers have defined satisfaction as the sum of pre-travel expectations, motivation, and experience [42,50]. However, little prior research has incorporated aspects of tourist experiences in connection with satisfaction. Instead, tourist experience at destinations has been widely used to assess destination satisfaction [42], or experience and satisfaction have been treated interchangeably [63].

More recent research has found some evidence that customer experience has a significant impact on customer satisfaction [64]. Tian-Cole, Crompton, and Willson [65] investigated the correlation between experience quality, overall satisfaction, and behavioral intentions, discovering that experience valuation directly contributed to tourists' overall satisfaction. Obradović et al. [44] examined how memorable nature-based experiences influence national park visitors' satisfaction. The result highlighted that national park visitors' positive emotions contributed to memorable park visit experiences, which in turn led to satisfaction. Rasoolimanesh et al. [21] also examined how memorable tourism experiences influence tourists' satisfaction. The results revealed that memorable tourism experience dimensions, such as local culture, involvement, and knowledge, had a positive relationship with satisfaction. This conclusion was consistent with previous research that indicated the importance of several aspects of customer experience affecting customer satisfaction [52,66,67]. Cole and Chancellor [63] noted that different experience attributes had different influences on satisfaction. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): *Learning experience has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 6 (H6): *Enjoyment experience has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 7 (H7): *Escape experience has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction.*

2.7.4. Effect of Tourists' Satisfaction on Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction is a highly examined variable in tourism studies because it is connected to destination loyalty in the literature [21,33,44]. Prior research identified tourist satisfaction as a significant indicator and determinant of loyalty [68]. Satisfaction has also been demonstrated to influence the decision to return to a destination [45]. Cronin and Taylor [69] concluded that, if customers are satisfied with the services offered, they are more likely to repurchase and suggest these services to others. Previous scholars have explored this association in various tourism sectors [64]. Kim, Vogt, and Knutson [70] encouraged further study into tourist satisfaction as an indicator of loyalty. Recently, Obradović et al. [44] supported such a direct relationship between satisfaction and loyalty by confirming national park visitors' satisfaction significantly influenced both revisit intention and recommendation. Piper et al. [71] also found that the more tourists were satisfied with their travel experiences in Southern Italy, the more they were willing to revisit the place and recommend it to others. In a heritage tourism setting, Rasoolimanesh et al. [21] examined the role of tourist satisfaction in the relationship between memorable tourism experiences and destination loyalty. The results indicated that dimensions of memorable tourism experiences (i.e., local culture, involvement, and knowledge) were positively associated with satisfaction, and there was a significant strong relationship between satisfaction and destination loyalty. Some scholars have also called for continued research into factors that may impact tourist satisfaction and loyalty [64]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed (Figure 1 illustrates all hypotheses):
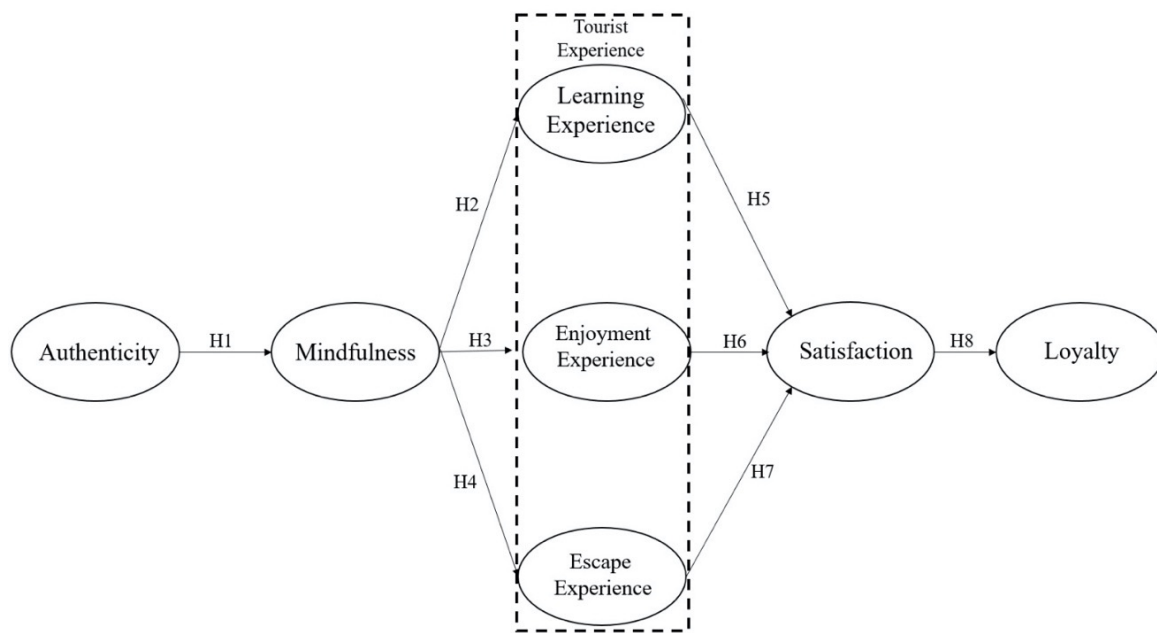
Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

Hypothesis 8 (H8): *Tourists' satisfaction has a positive effect on loyalty.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Site

Located in Beijing, China, the Forbidden City is known as a famous cultural heritage site and popular tourist attraction. The Palace Museum was an imperial palace of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the site is over 600 years old. The destination houses outstanding art and objects that represent Chinese civilization and has the distinction of being a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Palace Museum is highly symbolic as a Chinese heritage site, conveying cultural and historical significance and allowing Chinese and foreign tourists to appreciate Chinese culture. In 2019, 19.3 million people visited this site [72]. Prior research has indicated that proper tourism interpretation could deepen tourists' emotional connections with and understanding of tourism destinations [48]. There are different interpretive services at the Palace Museum, including printed materials with textual interpretation, tour guides, audio narration, and smartphone devices with interpretive information for tourists.

3.2. Measurement

In order to measure perceived authenticity, seven items (e.g., "The Forbidden City is an authentic portrayal of ancient life", "I wanted to try the unique cultural experience at The Forbidden City") were derived from prior studies [73,74]. The scale used in this research to measure perceived authenticity contained items from two different studies that were adapted for the context of this study. Three items came from a study by Meng and Choi [73] and four items came from a study by Lu, Chi, and Liu [73,74]. All seven items were previously found to have reliability and validity [73], and a five-point Likert scale was used for measurement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) in this study.

Moscardo [75] developed a measure of socio-cognitive mindfulness in tourism. It is a widely used measure in tourism studies. The same six-item version of the scale was used in later research in park and tourism settings, and the scale has been found to be reliable and valid [33,60,76]. Frauman and Norman's [76] mindfulness items were modified for this research. These six items were measured with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Kang and Gretzel [12] devised a measure of tourist experience and noted that it had reliability and validity. The same measurement items were modified and used in this

study. There were four items used to measure learning experience (e.g., "I expanded my understanding of The Forbidden City") and three items for both enjoyment experience (e.g., "I had fun") and escape experience (e.g., "I felt like I was in another world"). Again, measurement occurred through the use of a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

The satisfaction measure (e.g., "I felt satisfied about the trip", "I felt my expectation before the trip had been met") was modified from research completed by Lu, Chi, and Liu [73]. The same four items from that study were adjusted to be used as the satisfaction measure for this research. The loyalty measure (e.g., "I will recommend The Forbidden City to others", "I will visit The Forbidden City again") in this study used two items from Lin and Liu's [77] loyalty measure and two items from Moon and Han's [78] loyalty measure, adapting them for use in this study. The satisfaction and loyalty variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and are reliable and valid according to prior researchers [73,77,78].

3.3. Data Collection

The questionnaire was first completed in English. Then, it was translated into Mandarin Chinese by researchers fluent in both languages. The translated questionnaire underwent review by five professors and ten graduate students (affiliated with the Department of Tourism Management at Dongbei University of Finance and Economics) fluent in the languages English and Mandarin. After receiving comments on grammar, accuracy, and spelling issues, the questionnaire was revised. A pilot study was undertaken at Surrey International Institute wherein graduate students and faculty examined the survey questionnaire. In total, 15 participants in the pilot study tested how appropriate the content was, as well as the ease of understanding.

Before beginning data collection, 15 faculty and graduate students at Surrey International Institute completed a pilot study to test the ease of understanding and appropriateness of the content. After minor changes related to wording and spelling, a final questionnaire was developed and shared through a questionnaire application called Wenjuanxing (wjx.cn), enabling the survey to be delivered online and data collection to commence. The study population comprised Chinese heritage tourists aged 18 and above who had visited the Forbidden City within one year preceding data collection. As a non-interventional study, approval was not obligatory due to national laws where the study was completed. Informed consent was obtained from potential participants in the survey questionnaire, and information about the research study was delivered to participants prior to their participation. The snowball sampling method was used by contacting participants from different groups, such as students, staff, and alumni of Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, and by sharing study information on company internet forums (e.g., Jilin Qinde Economic and Trade Co., Ltd.; Jilin Fuyo Food Co., Ltd.; Jilin Xinguang Real Estate Development Co., Ltd.; and Changchun Dazheng High Technology Industry Co., Ltd; all located in Jilin Province). Data collection occurred from 31 March to 4 April 2021, and 424 questionnaires were collected. The strict screening of responses led to 61 responses being removed (straight-line answers were excluded), leaving 363 valid questionnaires to analyze, an effective response rate of 85.8%.

3.4. Data Analysis

Before running the main analysis, *z*-scores and Mahalanobis distance were tested to detect univariate and multivariate outliers [79]. Then, the data were examined to identify if there were any missing data. There were no missing data found in the dataset. To test the proposed research hypotheses, data analysis proceeded through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM), which were run respectively using AMOS 24. The generally recommended minimum sample size for conducting SEM is 150 [80]. The sample size consisted of 363 responses and was acceptable to undertake SEM analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of Respondents

According to Table 1, the majority of respondents (57.9%) were female. Respondents covered all potential age groups from 18 to over 65. Most participants (53.7%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. Behavioral characteristics of the sample were also collected, including visit mode, times visited, and visit duration.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variables	Type	N	%
Gender	Male	153	42.1
	Female	210	57.9
Age	18–24	195	53.7
	25–34	39	10.7
	35–44	42	11.6
	45–54	44	12.1
	55–64	22	6.1
	>65	21	5.8
Visit times	Once	171	47.1
	Two times	99	27.3
	Three times	42	11.6
	More than three times	51	14
Visit duration	1 h	31	8.5
	2 h	111	30.6
	3 h	130	35.8
	4 h	58	16
	Over 5 h	33	9.1
Accompanied by (multiple)	Alone	81	22.3
responses were allowed	With friends	175	48.2
for this question only)	With family group	252	69.4
	Business travel	39	10.7
	Travel by travel agency	55	15.2
Types of interpretation	Tour guide	68	18.7
	Audio guide device	116	32
	Online guide on smartphone	53	14.6
	Printed materials (e.g., booklets, visitor guide map)	45	12.4
	Others	58	16
	Not used	23	6.3

The greatest number of participants had visited the Forbidden City once or twice (74.4%). For visit duration, 35.8% of participants took around three hours during their visit, and 30.6% visited for two hours. Most of the participants preferred to visit the Forbidden City with their families. The least common visit mode was business travel. For the question "While visiting The Forbidden City, which type of interpretation did you use?", the largest number of respondents chose the audio guide device (32%). Only 6.3% said they did not use interpretation during their visit.

4.2. Measurement Model Examination

Prior to examining the measurement and structural models, normality issues were checked by screening the data. By examining the skewness and kurtosis estimates in SPSS 28.0, the normality of the data was examined, and all the skewness and kurtosis coefficient values were less than 1.0 or 2.0, respectively, for each item (see Table 2). Once data were determined to have a normal distribution, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of each construct and determine the factor structure for the measurement model. Standardized factor loadings for each item were checked and removed if they fell below 0.50. In this process, three items were dropped from further analysis. Two items from authenticity ("I like to be connected with local ways of life experience" and "I like the feeling of being myself and found travelling to The Forbidden City meaningful") and one item from escape experience ("I felt like I was in another world at The Forbidden City") were excluded. Factor loadings for all items were above 0.50 (ranging from 0.80 to 0.94) and were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.86 to 0.94, and the average variance extracted (AVE) values were between 0.71 and 0.82, which exceeded the recommended cut-off points of 0.70 for CR and 0.50 for AVE [80]. These values indicated that convergent validity was achieved for the measurement constructs.

For the constructs, the square root of the AVE with the inter-factor correlations was investigated to assess discriminant validity. All correlations (Table 3) were lower than the square root of each AVE, demonstrating acceptable discriminant validity [81]. The results of the CFA revealed the model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 587.729$, $df = 310$, $\chi^2/df = 1.90$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.97, RFI = 0.93, RMR = 0.027, RMSEA = 0.050).

4.3. Structural Model Testing

The research model (Figure 1) was evaluated using SEM, which allowed for the evaluation of eight hypotheses within the model. The structural model demonstrated a strong model fit ($\chi^2 = 437.428$, $df = 250$, $\chi^2/df = 2.19$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.97, NFI = 0.94, RMR = 0.041, RMSEA = 0.057). Application of the structural model enabled the evaluation of t-values and beta coefficients. According to Hair et al. [82], the beta coefficient demonstrates the direction of relationships between the explained variables and the independent variable; the value of a path coefficient has to be 0.1 at a minimum to explain impacts in a given model. The general rule for understanding the relationship between constructs and significance is that a t-value that is greater than or equal to 1.96 and a *p*-value that is less than or equal to 0.05 indicate significance [83]. These principles were employed in this study to determine the significance of the path coefficients between the variables examined in this study.

Results from testing the structural model indicated that authenticity positively influenced mindfulness ($\beta = 0.73$, $t = 13.20$). Mindfulness had a positive effect on three dimensions of the tourist experience: learning experience ($\beta = 0.70$, $t = 13.39$), enjoyment experience ($\beta = 0.77$, $t = 14.55$), and escape experience ($\beta = 0.65$, $t = 10.83$). Learning experience ($\beta = 0.15$, $t = 3.07$) and enjoyment experience ($\beta = 0.68$, $t = 12.03$) had positive effects on satisfaction (escape experience did not). A strong relationship between satisfaction and loyalty ($\beta = 0.79$, $t = 16.70$) was demonstrated. Therefore, as depicted in Table 4, H_1, H_2, H_3, H_4, H_5, H_6, and H_8 were accepted, while H_7 was rejected. Furthermore, the squared multiple correlations (SMCs), or R^2, indicative of the percent of variance explained in outcome variables, were between 0.34 and 0.54. The values and each variable are shared for consideration: mindfulness (SMC = 0.54), learning experience (SMC = 0.50), enjoyment experience (SMC = 0.59), escape experience (SMC = 0.42), satisfaction (SMC = 0.57), and loyalty (SMC = 0.62). The variance in loyalty was explained by satisfaction, and experience factors were fairly robust.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Factors and Items	Standardized Loading	S.E.	Skew.	Kurt.	C.R.	Composite Reliability	AVE
Authenticity							
Ancient tradition is well-preserved at the Forbidden City	0.85	N/A	−0.743	0.551	N/A		
The Forbidden City is an authentic portrayal of ancient life	0.82	0.05	−0.906	0.972	19.30	0.93	0.72
The Forbidden City presents local history/culture well	0.89	0.05	−0.949	1.878	18.63		
The Forbidden City arouses feelings of authentic history/culture	0.86	0.05	−0.988	1.481	18.74		
I wanted to try the unique cultural experience at the Forbidden City	0.83	0.05	−0.822	0.495	19.86		
Mindfulness							
I had my interest captured	0.82	N/A	−0.611	0.318	N/A		
I searched for answers to questions I may have had about the Forbidden City	0.85	0.06	−0.575	−0.065	19.63	0.92	0.71
I had my curiosity aroused about the Forbidden City	0.85	0.05	−0.805	0.471	19.60		
I inquired further about things in the Forbidden City	0.84	0.06	−0.678	−0.009	18.98		
I explored and discovered new things about the Forbidden City	0.84	0.06	−0.595	−0.020	19.16		
I felt involved in what was going on around me at the Forbidden City	0.85	0.06	−0.578	−0.162	19.42		
Learning experience							
I expanded my understanding of the Forbidden City	0.90	N/A	−0.930	1.693	N/A		
I gained information and knowledge about the Forbidden City	0.89	0.04	−0.986	1.206	25.01	0.93	0.77
My curiosity about the Forbidden City was enhanced	0.83	0.04	−0.824	1.271	24.17		
I learned many different things about the Forbidden City	0.88	0.04	−0.898	1.523	21.82		
Enjoyment experience							
I had fun	0.91	N/A	−0.689	0.183	N/A		
I enjoyed being in the Forbidden City	0.88	0.04	−0.874	0.726	25.11	0.93	0.82
I derived a lot of pleasure from the Forbidden City	0.92	0.04	−0.945	1.980	25.16		
Escape experience							
I got away from it all	0.90	N/A	−0.690	−0.043	N/A	0.86	0.75
I got so involved that I forgot everything else at the Forbidden City	0.83	0.04	−0.545	−0.395	24.79		
Satisfaction							
I felt happy about the trip	0.93	N/A	−0.954	1.571	N/A		
I felt satisfied about the trip	0.94	0.04	−0.901	1.428	21.99	0.94	0.81
I felt I had a better understanding of local history/culture after the trip	0.87	0.04	−0.896	1.272	25.39		
I felt my expectation before the trip had been met	0.85	0.05	−0.832	0.670	25.52		
Loyalty							
I will recommend the Forbidden City to others	0.94	N/A	−0.905	1.701	N/A		
I will say positive things about the Forbidden City	0.90	0.03	−0.760	1.382	29.80		
I will visit the Forbidden City again	0.86	0.04	−0.854	1.336	26.43		
I intend to revisit the Forbidden City in the future	0.80	0.04	−0.529	0.085	29.80	0.93	0.77

Goodness-of-fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 587.729$, $df = 310$, $\chi^2/df = 1.90$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.97, RFI = 0.93, RMR = 0.0027, RMSEA = 0.050

Note: $p < 0.001$. N/A. In AMOS, with one loading, the first items of the variable in this study had to be fixed to 1. Thus, the critical ratio (C.R.) and standard error (S.E.) could not be calculated for the items.

Table 3. Validity assessment criteria and inter-factor correlations.

Measures	AU	MI	LE	EJE	EE	SA	LO
Authenticity	**0.85**						
Mindfulness	0.66	**0.84**					
Learning experience	0.74	0.61	**0.88**				
Enjoyment experience	0.73	0.67	0.88	**0.91**			
Escape experience	0.49	0.55	0.63	0.64	**0.87**		
Satisfaction	0.71	0.68	0.64	0.72	0.43	**0.90**	
Loyalty	0.70	0.63	0.66	0.73	0.43	0.78	**0.88**

Note: 1. The bold diagonal elements are the square root of the AVE. 2. Off-diagonal elements are the inter-factor correlations. 3. AU: authenticity, MI: mindfulness, LE: learning experience, EJE: enjoyment experience, EE: escape experience, SA: satisfaction, LO: loyalty.

Table 4. Standardized regression weights and model testing.

Hypothesized Path	Standardized Estimates	*t*	Supported?
H_1: Authenticity $\rightarrow$ mindfulness	0.73	13.20 ***	Yes
H_2: Mindfulness $\rightarrow$ learning experience	0.70	13.39 ***	Yes
H_3: Mindfulness $\rightarrow$ enjoyment experience	0.77	14.55 ***	Yes
H_4: Mindfulness $\rightarrow$ escape experience	0.65	10.83 ***	Yes
H_5: Learning experience $\rightarrow$ satisfaction	0.15	3.07 *	Yes
H_6: Enjoyment experience $\rightarrow$ satisfaction	0.68	12.03 ***	Yes
H_7: Escape experience $\rightarrow$ satisfaction	−0.05	−0.95	No
H_8: Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ loyalty	0.79	16.70 ***	Yes

Note: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

This study sought to fill a gap in the literature by fulfilling the research aim of examining the relationships between perceived authenticity, mindfulness, and tourist experience in heritage tourism. This research served as the first empirical study of perceived authenticity as an antecedent of mindfulness. Online data from Chinese tourists who had visited the Forbidden City were gathered. Implementing the two-step CFA–SEM investigative approach [80], data were examined through the structural relationships within the proposed conceptual model. Through hypotheses testing, seven hypotheses were confirmed concerning perceived authenticity, mindfulness, tourist experience, satisfaction, and loyalty, indicating several notable findings.

The first research question explored was, "Is there a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and mindfulness?". Authenticity positively and directly had an influence on mindfulness in this study ($\beta = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$). Given the context of this study, it can be concluded that the more well-preserved ancient tradition and history is at the Forbidden City, the higher the degree of mindfulness that can occur among tourists. Mindfulness can enhance curiosity and increase interest in discovering new things at a heritage site. This emphasizes the importance of authenticity in order to provide more mindful tourism experiences for heritage tourists. This finding was consistent with mindfulness theory and prior research [7–9,36] and provides empirical evidence to validate the theory and support prior scholarship.

The second research question examined was, "Is there a significant relationship between mindfulness and dimensions of heritage tourists' experiences?". The study found that mindfulness had a significant direct impact on learning experience, enjoyment experience, and escape experience ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$), as

Kang and Gretzel [12] had found. Thus, the more that tourists who visited the Forbidden City had a higher level of mindfulness, the more information they could get from their visit, the more they could enjoy their visit, and the more they could experience a break from daily realities. This confirmed what the literature suggested concerning how mindfulness can influence the tourist experience [60,61]. The findings of Moscardo [8,35,36] were extended to a heritage tourism context. The third research question was, "Is there a significant relationship between heritage tourists' experience dimensions and satisfaction?". Satisfaction was found to be positively associated with both learning experience and enjoyment experience ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Findings that tourists' experience resulted in satisfaction [21,44,52,66,67] have been reported by prior researchers, and the results extended these findings to heritage tourism. Escape experience did not significantly influence satisfaction ($\beta = -0.05$, $p > 0.05$) in this study. Escape experiences can enhance tourists' immersion in the destination environment. Past research has proposed that tourists feel an escape from ordinary life in and can connect with a national park setting [12]. However, in a cultural heritage setting, the stark contrast between past periods of time may not allow tourists to develop a strong connection to the site, even if the destination offers a potential escape experience. Thus, escape experience had a lower impact on satisfaction, whereas learning and enjoyment experiences did influence satisfaction in this study. The last research question considered was, "Does satisfaction significantly influence loyalty, given the variables employed in this study?". The results of this study indicated that satisfaction contributed to loyalty ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$). This indicated that the more tourists were satisfied with their tourism experiences at the Forbidden City, the higher the level of loyalty toward the destination they had. This finding was consistent with the essential role of satisfaction in visitor loyalty, as argued and verified previously [21,45,64,71,84,85].

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study provides empirical evidence to better understand authenticity, mindfulness, tourist experience, satisfaction, and loyalty in a heritage tourism context. Firstly, the findings of this research support the notion that perceived authenticity can result in tourists experiencing mindfulness. This relationship has been theorized and described in prior scholarship but has not been scrutinized before in empirical research. Thus, this is the most significant theoretical implication of the current study. Perceived authenticity leading to mindfulness is a finding consistent with mindfulness theory [7]. Similarly, it has been noted that authenticity could precede mindfulness and influence mindfulness [8,36]. The current study provides empirical verification for this variable relationship, having demonstrated that the perceived authenticity of a heritage site can directly and positively influence tourists' mindfulness.

Secondly, this study found that mindfulness can enhance the tourist experience, providing evidence of the critical role of mindfulness in heritage tourism. Learning, enjoyment, and escape experiences were discovered to have a positive influence on mindfulness in this study. This was consistent with Kang and Gretzel's [12] findings and extended those findings to a heritage tourism context. This study noted that tourists who are open to and recognize present events and experiences could engage more fully with their environment, which leads to enhanced tourist experiences [86]. This was consistent with what had been examined previously concerning mindfulness theory in a tourism context [8,35,36].

Thirdly, an important contribution of this study is that tourist experience positively influenced tourist satisfaction. In the heritage tourism context, individual tourist experience may be a prerequisite in order for satisfaction to be achieved. This study found that tourists are satisfied when they learn more and enjoy more through their experience at a heritage site. Moreover, the results suggested that the learning experience and enjoyment experience conveyed through tourist satisfaction lead to loyalty. It would be expected that loyalty would result in revisit intention due to the loyalty measurement used for the study. The finding concerning satisfaction and loyalty is consistent with previous studies [45,69] and extended their findings to heritage tourism.

Finally, this research also further contributed to the body of mindfulness literature by examining mindfulness as a driver to enhance tourists' experience. This study sought a direction to revive cultural heritage tourism in the post-pandemic world, and authentic culture being shared at heritage destinations can contribute to resilience in tourism. The study found that perceived authenticity in heritage tourism can enhance tourists' mindfulness and on-site experiences, both of which are thought to be a way to promote greater sustainability and resilience in future tourism.

5.2. Practical Implications

The Forbidden City contains traditional Chinese architecture and represents China's cultural heritage. The variable relationships that were examined in this research have implications for heritage tourism generally and in a Chinese context more specifically. According to this study, the authenticity of heritage tourism attractions can positively influence tourists' mindfulness and experiences, along with satisfaction and loyalty.

Authenticity is inherently important to heritage tourism. Thus, destination managers should protect the authenticity of site architecture and convey authentic portrayals to visitors. Properly maintaining a heritage site can serve to promote authenticity. The image and atmosphere of the historical period of time preserved by the heritage destination are critical to tourists' perceptions of authenticity; thus, site authenticity should be conveyed to tourists, possibly through interactive traditional performances, interpreters dressed in traditional costumes, or interactive mobile applications.

Heritage sites should understand the importance of enabling visitors to have mindful experiences, given that mindfulness influenced the tourist experience in this study. Interpretation provided by tour guides and podcast interpretation can help tourists to have mindful experiences [12]. A rich interpretive presentation (e.g., multimedia interpretation, detailed exhibit signs) can enable heritage tourists to better understand the historical and cultural contexts of heritage tourism sites [35] and the role of perceived authenticity can be beneficial for the enhancement of tourist experiences [56]. Thus, heritage tourism sites should consider applying and optimizing these services. Additionally, providing mindful experiences before a tourist's trip can influence subsequent tourist behavior [38]. Heritage site managers can also adopt brief mindfulness exercises [38] to enhance the tourist experience when tourists first arrive on site. A guided mindfulness session during tour interpretation could improve tourists' ability to maintain a high level of mindfulness throughout the visit. Implementing mindfulness at heritage tourism sites, heritage sites, and local communities can further sustainable and resilient tourism practices [38,39].

Enhancing the tourist experience is relevant to effectively increasing tourist satisfaction and loyalty at heritage tourism sites according to this research. Site managers can target activity planning to improve learning experiences and enjoyment experiences in order to increase tourists' satisfaction. In a heritage tourism setting, learning experiences can include the information contained at the site but also interpretation offered to tourists. This can include guided tours or on-site QR codes that can be used with mobile applications to access additional resources to augment learning opportunities at the site. Embracing technology can further learning as well as enjoyment experiences at heritage sites. The use of mobile applications at sites can allow tourists to visit specific places at the heritage destination they may be less aware of. Additionally, elements of gamification could be added to make tourists' experiences more interactive and enjoyable. For example, site managers could give tourists missions (i.e., visit selected attractions or take quizzes), and if the missions are completed, tourists could get a reward. Visiting designated places and learning about them can increase the degree of learning that tourists experience, and if tourists access QR codes or complete missions to receive small gifts, this could be a factor that could serve to entertain tourists when they visit heritage sites.

5.3. Limitations

Like all studies, the current study had limitations. Firstly, convenience sampling was the method used to collect data, so a limited number of potential heritage tourists were involved in the study. Future research should use more rigorous systematic sampling methods and seek to obtain responses from participants who have visited a heritage tourism site by using other sampling methods. Secondly, although the current study collected a sufficient number of responses among those who had visited the Forbidden City, the question of generalization remains. The sample frame of the current study consisted of Chinese heritage tourists only. Generalizations to other settings could be limited. Collecting data from a more diverse sample of heritage tourists could be considered in the future. Lastly, all respondents participated in heritage tourism activities in the Forbidden City, which may raise questions about whether the results of this study would be the same if completed at another heritage tourism site in China. It would also be interesting to examine if cultural differences may exist in perceived authenticity and mindfulness at heritage tourism sites.

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