HOW EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY INFLUENCES FLOW-LIKE EXPERIENCE INVOLVEMENT, SELF-CONGRUITY AND TOURIST EXPERIENCE? SULTANAHMET: A WORLD HERITAGE DESTINATION

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Abstract

Cultural heritage is as vital to the sustainability of tourism as it is to humanity. Therefore, safeguarding heritage destinations within their unique historical and cultural attributes is still a major issue in today's tourism environment. In addition to local and national authorities, tourists have a vital role in the promotion and sustainability of heritage destinations. The unique tourist attractions are an essential aspect that influences the motivation that plays a role in tourists' choice of destination. As tourists search for ways to escape everyday routines, heritage destinations are highly regarded as alternative destinations that offer opportunities for self-actualization and self-discovery. Tourists visiting heritage sites encounter a new spatial and temporal sphere, which gives them a sense of authenticity and genuineness. This experience, which can be a reflection of their true self, allows them to get into the flow. Thus, by immersing in the flow, tourists can have a memorable experience at the destination. The study was conducted in a quantitative research design on 226 international tourists visiting Sultanahmet district of Istanbul, a World Heritage destination. The study aimed to measure the effect of participants' existential authenticity on their flow experience, self-congruity and personal tourist experiences. Results showed that tourists' flow experience, self-congruity and personal tourist experience are significantly and positively affected by their existential authenticity.

Keywords: Existential authenticity, Self-congruity, Flow-like experience involvement, Tourist experience, Sultanahmet

INTRODUCTION

While social media and technology now provide great benefits to travelers, heritage—one of the main sources of tourism—acts as a catalyst for facilitation by using these digital and technological instruments. Modern-day tourist experiences, in its dynamic aspects, has evolved from the past to the present and has taken its current form, and this metamorphosis keeps changing. Supporting this view, Lyth (2006) argues that the rise of the experience paradigm is both the cause and the result of heritage. Lyth emphasizes that heritage should be understood as the contemporary use of history rather than history itself. Accordingly, because heritage presents people with the past in a way adapted to contemporary needs and purposes, it actually

fulfills the postmodern passion for the assemblage and consumption of individual experiences in current economic environment.

Typically, tourists can go on vacation to get rid of their routine selves, have fun and spend time with their friends (Shepherd, 2015). However, N. Wang (1999) asserts that tourists are preoccupied with an existential condition of being initialized by tourist activities in search of an existentially authentic tourist experience. To put it another way, existential experience is the ability for visitors to sample subjectively or intersubjectively the authenticity of being as part of the tourism process. Authenticity pertains to certain types of tourism, including those that entail the portrayal of the other or the past, such as history, ethnic and culture tourism.

Individuals who endure the constraints of daily life go beyond their own artificial environments in the destinations visited and experience these places to the extent that match their true selves. Thus, tourists who experience affirmations in their self-discovery, act in a state of flow by the behaviors they exhibit in the destination and the activities they participate in. Such experiences enable the tourists to know themselves and increase their level of awareness. In this respect, heritage destinations have different characteristics from classical destinations and function as a bridge between the past and the present.

This study was conducted in Sultanahmet district of Istanbul/Türkiye, a monumental heritage destination. Istanbul has been home to significant religious, artistic and political events for over two millenia due to its advantageous location on the Bosphorus peninsula between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, the Balkans and Anatolia (UNESCO, 2023). On the peninsula, there are numerous tourism routes that are set by non-governmental organizations, different institutions, and the local municipality. Furthermore, there are themed tour routes in the vicinity (Tak & Berkmen, 2023). Sultanahmet, as being one of the most popular attraction points of Istanbul hosts Hagia Sofia, Great Palace Mosaics Museum, Yerebatan Cistern, Istanbul Archeological Museum, Topkapı Palace, Istanbul Museum of History of Science and Technology in Islam, Şerefiye Cistern, Sultanahmet Mosque, Hagia Irene Museum, Hippodrome, Obelisk of Theodosius, Walled Obelisk and many other historical masterpieces. Hotels, cafes, restaurants, travel agencies and souvenir shops surround historical Sultanahmet. The area subject to the research is located within the area represented in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Sultanahmet district is a region with high visitor density and located within the borders of the historical peninsula. According to Aykaç (2019), the musealization of Sultanahmet is still an ongoing process in a contemporary context.

Sultanahmet Urban and Archaeological Conservation Area is located on a hill in the east of the Historic Peninsula and involves two different regions: Sultanahmet Region which is a

popular tourist attraction point and Sur-i Sultani Region where Topkapı Palace is located. Sultanahmet District has been declared as an Urban Archaeological Site with its influental monuments as well as its residential, commercial and tourism functions. This region is the centre of two great empires and civilisations. Sultanahmet Urban and Archaeological Conservation Area represents a characteristic area within the Historic Peninsula with remarkable historical and cultural value on a national and international scale in terms of the momentous artefacts and ruins it hosts. Sultanahmet Urban and Archaeological Conservation Area is the heritage area with the highest number of registered monuments in Istanbul. There are also a total of 505 examples of civil architecture in the area (Historical Peninsula Management Plan, 2018) The aim of the study was to measure visitors' self-congruity, personal tourist experience, and flow-like experience involvement from the perspective of existential authenticity in the context of heritage tourism. Sultanahmet district was determined as the area where this study was implemented, as it is one of the most popular destinations attracting tourists in Türkiye.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Existential Authenticity

The promotion of the "unique" is embedded in the tourism industry (Shepherd, 2015). The term authenticity, by its nature, corresponds to ambiguous meanings and is interpreted through two different meanings, especially in the tourism literature. One of them is genuineness of the events or artifacts, and the second, as a human characteristic refers to being true to one's essential nature (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). 'Authentic' and 'the original' have evolved into catchphrases for a variety of tourist destinations, activities, and establishments that in various ways aim to be true to their origins (Olsen, 2002). Existential thought contrasts between a human consciousness that is focused on the subjective experience and the rational one that organizes and catalogs reality in a logical order, much like the well-known metaphorical division between a left and right hemisphere activity of the brain (Davidov & Russo-Netzer, 2022).

Existentialism, constructivism, and objectivism are the three approaches that have been used to frame authenticity in tourism literature (Zhu, 2012). According to Cong et al. (2022), existential authenticity refers to the inner meanings, thoughts and values ascribed by tourism stakeholders, local culture and tourism businesses in the development of a destination. From the viewpoint of experiences, existential authenticity provides a framework for analyzing the various ways lived experience manifests itself (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Although the existential

perspective is based on the Heideggerian approach, Knudsen et al. (2016) argue that authenticity is a fantasy in essence and dialects with the concept of alienation.

Within the context of heritage tourism, existential authenticity appears as a freedom-oriented and experiential phenomenon (Fu, 2019). According to MacCannell (2013), the core of tourism is the search for authenticity. Supplementarily, Gardiner et al. (2022) claimed that, authenticity is an essential element in order to further expand the understanding of the historical heritage tourism experience and more to the point, existential authenticity is at the core of understanding tourist experience. The contextual content of authenticity is perceived to vary from culture to culture and may vary according to historical, insightful and cultural traditions. For this reason, authenticity will gain a tourist-specific context by understanding different touristic motivations in the context of different tourist groups (Shepherd, 2015; Aydın & Ünüvar, 2021). Since tourists recall their past to identify themselves, heritage tourism is closely related to existential authenticity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). In order to determine tourist satisfaction when considering heritage tourism in historic locations, perceived authenticity is one of the crucial factors to be considered (Lu et al., 2015).

Liminal features of the tourist experience may be more unambiguously revealed by existential authenticity. Thus, visitors are liberated from the constraints of daily life and are not influenced by social norms and impositions. This sense of freedom will make it easier for tourists to create new social contexts and will reveal an authentic self. An opportunity to be authentic can arise in this circumstance (H. Kim & Jamal, 2007). Moreover, MacCannell (1973), argues that tourists often intend to visit a destination with the desire to experience authenticity and may think that the destination they actually visit is authentic, but it is difficult to assume whether the experience is truly authentic.

Olsen (2002) annotates existential authenticity as an implicit selling element of the tourism products. Based on the argument of Lacanian psychoanalysts, Knudsen et al. (2016) argued that authenticity is a fantasy in tourism marketing and in the context of tourist experience and motivation. From the perspective of a variable, perceived authenticity can be viewed both as an output/consequence of the tourist experience or as an input/antecedent of tourist behavior (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Besides, in existing literature, existential authenticity is typically approached as a one-dimensional construct (Fu, 2019). As reported by the previous research, tourists' perceived image of the destination, emotional experience, cognitive loyalty and satisfaction are influenced by existential authenticity (Chen et al., 2022; L. Li & Li, 2022; W. Lu et al., 2022; Park et al., 2019).

Personal Tourist Experience

Experience plays a major role in tourism. Tourism, which can also be called a hedonic experience, forms the basis for the creation of experiences that are emotion-based and valued for unforgettable moments (Frochot & Batat, 2013). The services and activities a tourist partakes in while on vacation or while away from home can be categorized as "tourist experiences." (Sharpley & Stone, 2010, p. 3). The first definitions of the tourist experience reveal its difference from routine activities in the individual's daily life. While Smith (1989) describes the tourist experience as experiencing change, Cohen (1979) portrays the tourist experience as seeking novelty and strangeness and as a temporality experienced outside of daily activities.

Tourist experiences have altered in parallel with the tourism phenomena, which has undergone multiple evolutions in today's consumption environment. The tourist experience is predominantly abstract and complex. According to Wight (2021), one of the key elements of tourism is experience which is a combination of different episodes in tourist's life cycle. As a process, the tourist experience builds on previous experiences (Vergopoulos, 2016). Besides, the framework for the tourism experience is improved by the co-creation of lived experience (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023). Tourist experience is the sum of the services and experiences provided or produced by the individuals, organizations and businesses that make up the tourism sector. These services and experiences can also be serendipitous and bring satisfaction or benefit to the tourist (Sharpley & Stone, 2010). From another point of view, Otto and Ritchie (1996) define tourist experience as a mental state that participants perceive. In another definition, Pine and Gilmore (1999) define experiences as events that elicit a personal response from people. Frochot and Batat (2013) argued that from the decision-making phase through the post-purchase phase, the experience must be taken into account.

The tourist's experience informs their decision-making during the journey and shapes their post-trip appraisal and behavioral intentions (X. Li et al., 2023). Although tourists can decide which touristic activities they want to participate in before their arrival at a destination, there may be some tourism type preferences that are shaped during their arrival at the destination, or tourists who have not yet decided upon arrival may make a choice guided by the elements in the destination.

The majority of tourist experiences occur in brief episodes (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). However, the visitor experience is a continuous, circular activity (Sharpley, 2021). From the point of view of marketing, experience in the tourism industry is a real source of destination appeal and enduring competitive advantage (Bernaki & Marso, 2023). In the literature, there

are several studies that focus on existential authenticity within the framework of tourism and hospitality (Fu, 2019; Light & Brown, 2020; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wassler & Kirillova, 2019; Yi et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2020).

Flow-Like Experience Involvement

According to Zaichkowsky (1985), involvement is defined as an individual's perception of the object's relevance based on innate needs, values, and interests. Correspondingly, experience involvement is characterized as individual, instantaneous involvement in the consumption of a particular experience (Zatori et al., 2018). From the tourism framework, experience involvement refers to the level of interest in the product and the affective reaction linked to it are equated with involvement (Manfredo, 1989). Experience involvement, an appropriate measurement tool for on-site experiences, is one that best describes real-time experience consumption and creation, given that some experiences are highly inclusive and can trigger emotions (Zatori et al., 2018).

As stated by Rickly-Boyd (2013), it is essential that "place" be taken into account in studies on authenticity and the tourist experience since it is an amalgamation of emotional, social, physical and cultural elements that contribute to the tourism experience. In the context of tourism and leisure, studies on "involvement" have discussed the terms pleasure and interest synonymously (Campos et al., 2017).

Depending on M. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) portrayal, intense experiential immersion in moment-to-moment activities is the defining characteristic of flow. The individuals are operating at their peak performance and focus all of their attention on the task at hand. According to his definition, when the individual is totally immersed in an activity that they are completely unaware of time, exhaustion and everything else but activity itself they are regarded to be in flow. Huang et al. (2023), on the other hand, refer to the flow state as the hedonic aspect of individuals' behavioral intentions and attitudes. According to Nugraha et al. (2021), experience involvement influences both tourist satisfaction and memorable tourism experience.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1978) argues that subjectively valued experiences require conscious attention to a small field of stimuli. However, people rarely experience the pleasure that accompanies the flow experience because they do not know how to concentrate even under the most favorable psychological conditions. Coffey and Csikszentmihályi (2016) emphasize the balance between the skills of the individual and the challenge of the activity as the first condition of the flow experience. In particular, if difficulties dramatically overmatch the

individual's skills, the individual may experience anxiety. Oppositely, if skills surpass challenges, boredom is experienced.

In order to experience flow in tourism, the visitor must exhibit some flow propensity and be motivated to enter the flow state when given the right environmental cues (Da Silva deMatos et al., 2021). Moreover, as Seran et al. (2021) stated, tourist's experience involvement can enhance their intention to recommend the destination to others. According to M. Kim and Thapa (2018) flow experience significantly affects satisfaction.

According to Ghani and Deshpande (1994), the primary aspects of flow are a) total focus in an activity and b) the enjoyment one experiences when engaging in an activity. M Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that on rare occasions, flow might happen coincidentally due to a fortunate convergence of internal and external circumstances. Despite the possibility of such occurrences, it is much more likely that flow will be the outcome of a structured activity, a person's capacity to induce flow, or both. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2019) found that, when visitors exhibit greater levels of cultural identity and innovation, the experience of flow is improved and, authenticity of a cultural tourism destination can strengten the flow experience.

Wu and Liang (2011) concluded that emotions of tourists are positively influenced by their flow experiences and visitors that have a propensity for high internal reward or active participation in tourism-related activities may have a more positive experience. As reported by Zhang et al. (2019), authentic experience is influenced by tourists' flow experience and authenticity is an essential resource of flow.

2.4. Self-Congruity

Self-congruity is essentially based on the concept of self-concept. Self-concept was introduced to the literature by Rosenberg (1979, p. 7) and defined as "the sum of a person's feelings and thoughts in regard to himself as an object". Actual self-image is a component that can reflect consumer self-concept, and consumer self-concept is categorized in four dimensions as ideal, actual, social, and ideal social self-image. The "actual self-image" refers to how consumers see themselves in reality and reflects their personal identity. What consumers would like to become or how they would like to see themselves is the "ideal self-image". Consumers' perceptions of how significant others view them are referred to as their "social self-image". How individuals would like others to evaluate them is referred as ideal social self-image (Sirgy, 2018).

Impacts of having an ideal and actual self-image may vary depending on the type of tourism (M.-H. Li & Lai, 2021). In the same way Sirgy (2018) argues that, the intention to revisit will increase as there is a greater fit between the image of the destination and how the tourists

perceive themselves. To illustrate, the likelihood that a tourist will visit a location increases with the degree of congruity between the destination's image and their real and ideal self-concept (Beerli et al., 2007). Furthermore, tourists tend to exhibit more affirming affective and behavioral approval when their ritualized experiences align with their ideal or actual self-images (Yan et al., 2024). Ultimately, Huaman-Ramirez (2021) proposes that, to improve tourists' attitudes toward the destination, destination managers should create a destination image that aligns with visitors' self-perception.

When analyzed from a marketing perspective, self-congruity affects consumer pre-purchase and post-purchase behavior (Sirgy, 2018). When a tourist product and a tourist destination are co-marketed, a tourist's perception of themselves is shaped by the place through place-product image transfer. Tourists' willingness to visit a destination may increase if image transfer is more successful since they will feel more strongly that it aligns with their self-concept (Liu et al., 2023). By developing a self-brand relationship with tourist destinations, travelers communicate, affirm, or strengthen their ideal and authentic selves. Travelers frequently express and retain a positive self by using the romanticism, culture, or personality of the destination that is conveyed in destination advertising (Guo et al., 2024). In respect to today's environment, social media usage by visitors both during and after their visits is influenced by self-congruity (Luna-Cortés, 2017). Alternatively, Šegota et al. (2022) unveiled that self-congruity directly affects WOM, engagement, expectations and place satisfaction of visitors. Additionally, Kumar (2016) concluded that self-congruity is significantly and positively affected by destination personality and that, destination satisfaction is affected by the self-congruity. On the other hand, Huaman-Ramirez (2021) asserts that, with visitor involvement, positive impact of self-congruity on destination attitude increases. Furthermore, Guo et al. (2024) revealed that advertising for destination and visit intention are mediated by self-congruence.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire administered to international tourists visiting the Sultanahmet district, located within the historical peninsula (Old City) of Istanbul. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test with 32 participants was conducted to ensure clarity and reliability of the survey items.

In the study, a quantitative method was employed, using a convenience sampling technique by surveying tourists on-site during their visit to the Sultanahmet heritage area. This non-probabilistic approach is widely used in tourism research, especially in high-density heritage

destinations where constructing a complete sampling frame is not feasible (Veal, 2017). Convenience sampling allowed the researchers to effectively reach a diverse group of tourists experiencing the destination. As one of Türkiye's most well-known tourist spots, the Sultanahmet district was selected as the study area. Data collection took place between June and August 2022. A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed, and 226 valid responses were obtained from tourists representing 38 countries.

Figure 1 Location of the Study Area: Sultanahmet District, Istanbul

Source: MapChart (2024), Google (2024).

Fig. 1 illustrates the geographic location of the Sultanahmet district within Türkiye and Istanbul. The left panels show Türkiye and Istanbul's position within the national context. while the satellite images on the right highlight Sultanahmet (marked in yellow) as the core World Heritage tourism area examined in this study.

The research aimed to measure the effect of tourists' existential authenticity on their personal tourist experience, self-congruity, and flow-like experience involvement, as well as the relationships among these variables.

The Flow-like Experience (FEI) construct was measured using the items developed by Zatori et al. (2018). Self-congruity (SC) was assessed through the items proposed by Zhou et al. (2021) within the context of cultural heritage. Tourists' existential authenticity (EA) was measured using the existential authenticity dimension of the authenticity scale developed by Kolar and Žabkar (2010). The Personal Tourist Experience (PTE) construct was measured with the scale developed by Diallo et al. (2022). All scale items were assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.

The research initially examines the concept of existential authenticity (EA) (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010); which refers to tourists escaping from daily routines and classical mass tourism,

contacting their true selves and getting to know their own selves, independent of external pressures. Another concept closely related to above mentioned, self-congruity (SC) (Sirgy, 2018); is a psychological concept that deals with the compatibility of tourists' ideal self-image and actual self-image. Personal tourist experience (PTE), defined by Otto and Ritchie (1996) as a mental state that participants perceive, is another variable used in the research. Another critical variable examined in the study regarding tourists visiting Sultanahmet is flow-like experience involvement (FEI), which emphasizes focusing completely on an activity and enjoying the experience (Ghani & Deshpande, 1994). The research assumes that these four variables are closely related to each other and that these variables affect the tourist's total experience. The study conceptualized existential authenticity as a predictor of self-congruity, personal tourist experience, and flow-like experience involvement. These relationships were examined using structural equation modeling (SEM). The hypotheses tested were:

H1: Existential authenticity among tourists visiting the Sultanahmet district positively and significantly influences their personal tourist experience.

H2: Existential authenticity among tourists visiting the Sultanahmet district positively and significantly influences their level of self-congruity.

H3: Existential authenticity among tourists visiting the Sultanahmet district positively and significantly influences their involvement in flow-like experiences.
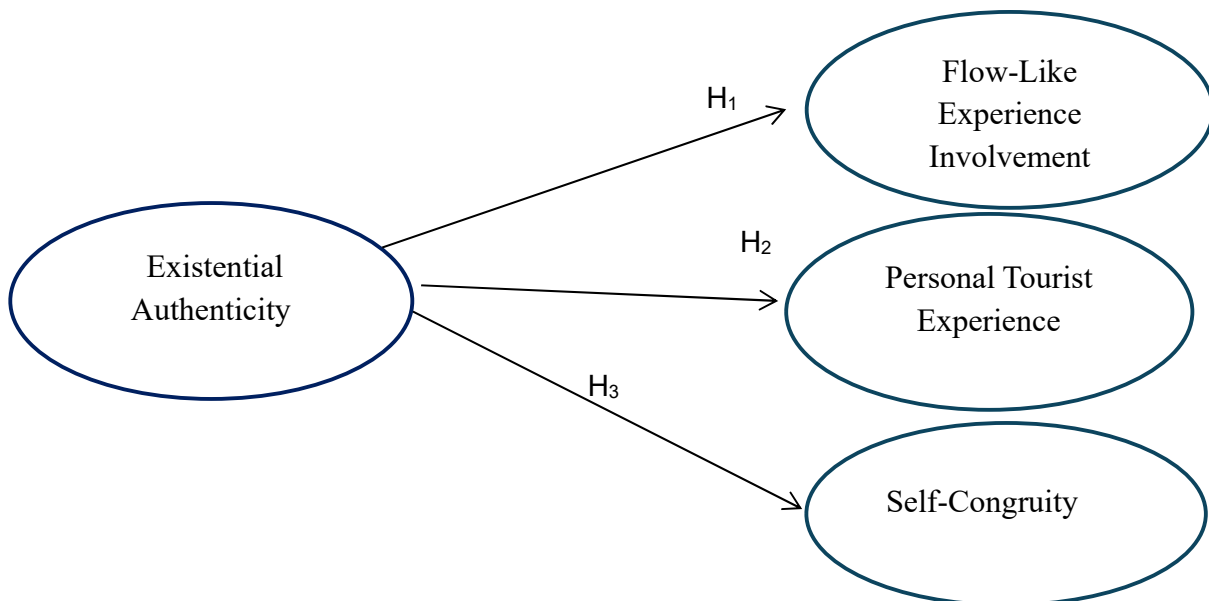
Figure 2 Research Model

Table 1 Overall CFA for Measurement Model

Items and Constructs	t- values	R^2	Standardized Factor Loadings	CR (Composite Reliability)	AVE* (>0.50)
Existential Authenticity				0,884	0,560
EA_1	*	,536	,732		
EA_2	9,586	,439	,663		
EA_3	11,625	,640	,800		
EA_4	11,050	,579	,761		
EA_5	10,068	,483	,695		
EA_6	11,981	,680	,825		
Self-Congruity				0,933	0,698
SC_1	*	,569	,754		
SC_2	15,733	,714	,845		
SC_3	14,038	,782	,884		
SC_4	14,167	,795	,892		
SC_5	13,147	,698	,836		
SC_6	12,374	,629	,793		
Flow-Like Experience Involvement				0,866	0,519
FEI_1	*	,507	,712		
FEI_2	9,472	,470	,685		
FEI_3	10,617	,591	,769		
FEI_4	10,952	,631	,794		
FEI_5	9,558	,472	,687		
FEI_6	9,304	,446	,668		
Personal Tourist Experience				0,843	0,575
PTE_1	*	,390	,625		
PTE_2	9,450	,673	,820		
PTE_3	11,359	,601	,775		
PTE_4	9,286	,635	,797		

***p<,001, CR> 0.7, AVE>0.5 and CR>AVE
Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019)

Table 1 presents the confirmatory factor analysis findings for the measurement model. t values, R2 values, standardized factor loadings, CR, and AVE values for 4 different variables are shown in the table. According to Hair et al. (2019), standardized factor loadings greater than 0.50 in factor analysis are considered practically significant. Factor loadings in the model meet this criterion. AVE and CR values were also assessed for convergent validity of measurement. The table shows that CR values are above 0.7, AVE values are above 0.5, and CR values are greater than AVE values. Table 1 shows that all these criteria are met and the values are within the acceptable range.
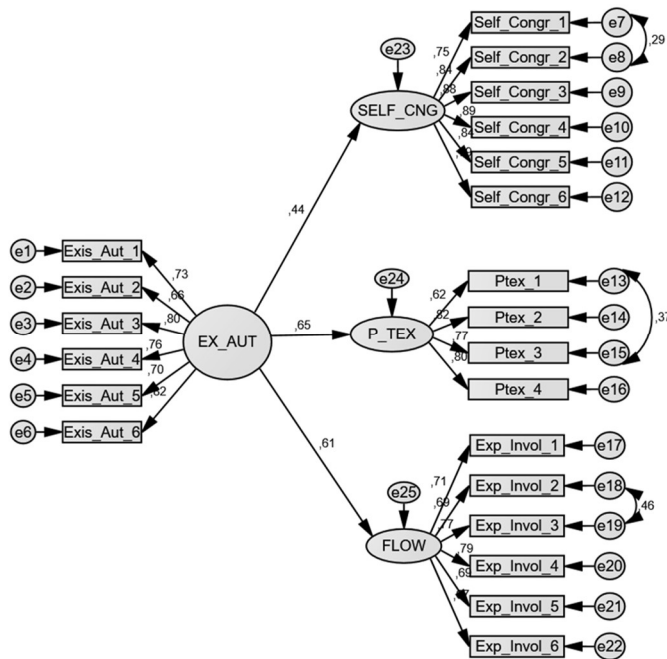
Figure 3 Structural Equation Model of the Construct

Figure 3 illustrates the effect of EA on SC, PTE and FEI. Variables represent a component of a consistent structural equation model. The requirement for studies using structural equation modeling is that the data must have a normal distribution (Kline, 2011). According to C.R. (Critical Ratio) values of skewness and kurtosis parameters, all variables met the requirements of normal distribution criterion on the basis of the data normality test generated from AMOS output (Westfall & Henning, 2013). In the model created to measure the effect of existential authenticity on self-congruity, personal tourist experience and flow-like experience involvement, although some values were below the recommended interval in the first model, after 7-8, 13-15 and 18-19 modification indices were applied acceptable values were reached. At the final stage of the model, it was found that the existential authenticity has a positive and significant effect on the self-congruity (β= 0.444; p <0.001), the personal tourist experience (β= 0.647; p<0.001), and flow-like experience involvement (β= 0.611; p <0.001). Estimative accuracy for the model indicated that existential authenticity represent for about % 19 of the variations in self-congruity (R^2= 0,189), %33 of the variations in personal tourist experience (R^2= 0,335), and %28 of the variations in flow-like experience involvement (R^2= 0,276). The results showed that the measurement model demonstrated the accuracy of goodness of fit (x2/df =1.815 RMSEA = 0.060, IFI = 0.950, CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.941, NFI=0.894 and SRMR = 0.056)

Table 2 Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alpha	EA	SC	FEI	PTE
EA	4,27	0,66	0,882	1	0,435*	0,525*	0,579*
SC	3,17	0,93	0,872	0,435*	1	0,587	0,595*
FEI	3,83	0,79	0,933	0,525*	0,587*	1	0,658*
PTE	3,93	0,82	0,854	0,579*	0,595*	0,658*	1

*$p < ,001$ (Two-tailed Pearson correlation is significant).

Table 2 illustrates correlations between variables of the construct. Table 2 shows that Pearson correlation between existential authenticity, (independent variable) personal tourist experience, self-congruity and flow-like experience involvement, range between 0.435 and 0.658 ($p < 0.001$). Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency and to assess the reliability of the scales. The table shows that the Cronbach alpha value for each scale was much higher than 0.70 and indicated a good internal consistency (DeVellis, 2012).

Table 3 Demographics of Respondents

Gender	n	Percent (%)	Education	n	Percent (%)
Male	89	39,4	Primary	59	26,1
Female	137	60,6	High School	15	6,6
Marital Status	**n**	**Percent (%)**	Associate	80	35,4
Married	131	58,0	Bachelor's	58	25,7
Single	95	42,0	Graduate	14	6,2
Age	**n**	**Percent (%)**	**Expenditure**	**n**	**Percent (%)**
18-24	83	36,7	Less than $500	53	23,5
25-29	44	19,5	$500-$1000	41	18,1
30-34	30	13,3	$1001-$2000	45	19,9
35-44	34	15,0	$2001-$3000	36	15,9
45-54	21	9,3	$3001-$4000	21	9,3
55-64	14	6,2	$4001 and above	30	13,3

Table 4 Visit-Related Characteristics of Respondents

Number of Visits	n	Percent (%)	Intention to Recommend to Others	n	Percent (%)
First	153	67,7	Yes	219	96,9
Second	41	18,1	No	7	3,1
Third	16	7,1	**Revisit Intention**	n	**Percent (%)**
Fourth	16	7,1	Yes	205	90,7
Fifth or more	0	0,0	No	21	9,3
Spirit of Sultanahmet	**n**	**Percent (%)**			
Yes	158	69,9			
No	68	30,1			
TOTAL	226	100	TOTAL	226	100

The demographic and visit-related characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. According to Table 4, more than 2/3 of the tourists visited Sultanahmet for the first time. Besides, approximately 70% of the participants stated that they would like to stay in an accommodation facility where they could feel the spirit of Sultanahmet. Besides, 97% of the participants stated that they would recommend Sultanahmet to others and lastly, more than 90% of the participants stated that they would like to re-visit Sultanahmet in the future.

Table 5 Hypotheses Results of Model Path Analysis

Hypotheses	β	S.E.	t Value	p	Result
H_1 Existential Authenticity ---- Personal Tourist Experience	**0,647***	0,089	6,899	***	Supported
H_2 Existential Authenticity ---- Self_Congruity	**0,444***	0,106	5,778	***	Supported
H_3 Existential Authenticity ---- Flow-Like Experience Involvement	**0,611***	0,100	7,193	***	Supported

***p<,001

Based on the significant effect of existential authenticity on personal tourist experience, H1 hypothesis was accepted (β= 0.647; p< 0.001). The second hypothesis of the research, H2 was also accepted as existential authenticity significantly affects the self-congruity (β= 0.444; p< 0.001). Likewise, the third hypothesis of the research, H3, was accepted as existential authenticity significantly affects the flow-like experience involvement (β= 0.611; p< 0.001).

Table 6 SEM Anaysis Results for the Structural Model

	X^2/df	IFI	CFI	TLI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Ref. Values	<5	≥0,90	≥0,90	≥0,90	≥0,90	<0,08	<0,10
Measurement Model	1,815	0,950	0,949	0,941	≥0,894	0,056	0,060

Table 6 illustrates structural equation model (SEM) results with specified parameters. x2/df, IFI, CFI, TLI, NFI, SRMR and RMSEA were determined and results showed that each of the indices was within the required or close ranges (Hair et al., 2019). According to the goodness of fit indices shown in the table, the SEM shows a good fit of the model.

CONCLUSIONS

Heritage tourism constitutes an important component of tourism attractions as it involves the interpretation and presentation of historical resources to contemporary visitors. Sultanahmet, located within the Historic Peninsula of Istanbul, represents one of Türkiye's most historically

layered heritage areas, characterized by its concentration of monumental structures and long-standing cultural significance. Despite its prominence as a major visitation zone, the experiential and psychological dimensions of tourist engagement within this setting have not been extensively examined in the heritage tourism literature. This study contributes to filling this gap by empirically exploring existential authenticity and its influence on key experiential outcomes among visitors to Sultanahmet.

In the contemporary tourism landscape, marked by rising interest in alternative tourism, visitors increasingly pursue authentic and meaningful experiences. Tourists who gravitate towards tourism types and destinations that match their own selves participate in tourism activities with a unique focus, being caught up in the flow of the mystical atmosphere and sense of place in that region. Supporting this point of view, Canavan (2018) asserted that tourists' participation in self-actualization activities that have deeper meanings and are more challenging than a classical tourism activity reveals that it is worth investing in these heritage destinations. In addition, he revealed that a tourism experience integrated with the concept of authenticity is a more inclusive type and more compatible with alternative tourism.

The results of this research conducted with 226 visitors from 38 countries revealed that tourists' existential authenticity have a positive and significant effect on the self-congruity (β= 0.444; $p < 0.001$), the personal tourist experience (β= 0.647; $p < 0.001$), and flow-like experience involvement (β= 0.611; $p < 0.001$). The main framework that forms the essence of this research is the simultaneous use of 4 variables (EA, FEI, SC & PTE), which have not been considered together in previous tourism studies, although they have a common denominator and are related to each other by means of context. Moreover, participants from 38 countries in this study revealed a cosmopolitan and homogeneous nature of the research. The analysis showed that over two thirds of the tourists are first-time visitors to Sultanahmet. Remarkably though, almost 70% of participants expressed their desire to stay in a lodging where they could experience Sultanahmet's spirit. Besides, 97% of the participants stated that they would recommend Sultanahmet to others and lastly, more than 90% of the participants stated that they would like to re-visit Sultanahmet in the future, which demonstrates Sultanahmet's significance in terms of its heritage tourism potential.

Considering the religious aspect, the most remarkable characteristics of the Sultanahmet heritage area is that it comprises masterpieces of both Christianity and Islam. To illustrate, Hagia Sophia, which construction started in 532, is a building that is still considered meaningful for the Christian community as well as for Muslims. Moreover, Sultanahmet is a multi-layered region that has been used for many different purposes throughout history. However, Aykaç

(2019) highlights that although the Sultanahmet district has long drawn travelers, it wasn't until the state-driven tourism programs of the mid-1980s that it became a significant travel destination.

From marketing point of view, Qiu and Zuo (2023) revealed that even cultural heritage labels in heritage sites influence destination image and improve tourists' visiting intentions through label-based cognitive and emotional ways. Additionally, as stated by Y.-H. Lu et al. (2022), certain aspects of the soundscape in a destination can induce a state of flow in tourists and thus affect their experiential behavior. Furthermore, Wasaya et al. (2024) found that tourists give priority to places that have heritage characteristics when choosing a destination. These are crucial perspectives for comprehending the Sultanahmet since historically, there used to be traditional houses built in horizontal architectural style in Sultanahmet, and in today's conditions, traditional appearance of these houses have not changed. As these buildings are now used as hotels and guesthouses, it becomes possible for visitors to internalize spirit of Sultanahmet more deeply and experience nostalgia and authenticity in the destination. This is also corroborated by our study's outputs.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that existential authenticity is not simply a desirable attribute of heritage tourism, but the psychological engine that powers deeper identity alignment, immersive flow states, and meaningful tourist experiences, positioning it as a foundational mechanism that future heritage tourism research can no longer overlook. When authenticity aligns with the self, heritage places cease to be backdrops and become catalysts for identity, immersion, and lasting experiential value.

IMPLICATIONS

This study makes a distinctive theoretical contribution by showing that existential authenticity is not merely an affective component of heritage tourism but a core psychological mechanism that activates self-related processes and deep experiential immersion. By empirically integrating EA, SC, FEI, and PTE into a single structural model, an approach not previously applied in heritage tourism research, this study integrates multiple psychological constructs into a unified theoretical framework and advances the understanding of authenticity-driven experiences in heritage contexts. Conducted in Sultanahmet, a highly layered World Heritage setting with exceptionally strong visitor intentions to recommend and revisit, the findings highlight that historically dense and symbolically charged environments are uniquely capable of triggering these authenticity-driven psychological responses and enhancing the depth of tourist experiences.

Istanbul's Sultanahmet Urban Archaeological Site is the only location where decisions of Tourism Site, Urban Site, Renewal Site and World Heritage meet (Örnek, 2023). Illustrating the anthropogenic contributions of carbon-based energy sources to climate change, Lafrenz Samuels & Platts (2020) argued that, besides natural and environmental impacts, social impacts on heritage resources are also unavoidable. Taking this issue into consideration, it is essential to resolve the problem of tourist density, which still reaches very high numbers in the region. In addition, the problem of protecting heritage resources is a common problematic aspect not only of Sultanahmet but also of tourism destinations around the world.

At heritage tourism destinations, sociocultural dynamism is predominately important for the development of cultural inheritance-based innovation. Essential elements that regulate and guide the development of this innovation and the authenticity of a tourism destination are approved cultural preservation and development plans (M.-Y. Wang et al., 2024). Moreover, in order to protect the Sultanahmet district, further development of international authority collaborations and initiatives for historical management should be made to safeguard and promote Sultanahmet.

Theoretical Implications

The findings yield several significant theoretical implications. First, the strong effect of EA on self-congruity provides empirical support for the proposition that authentic encounters allow visitors to align their real and ideal self-images with the cultural meanings of the destination. This extends self-congruity theory by demonstrating that identity-place alignment in heritage tourism is triggered by existential states rather than solely by symbolic interpretation or destination personality. Moreover, the influence of EA on PTE reinforces the established view that authenticity is a central driver of emotionally meaningful and cognitively rich experiences. The results strengthen experiential consumption theory (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) by revealing that existential authenticity functions as a catalyst that heightens evaluative, reflective, and emotional dimensions of tourist experience, confirming arguments within the experience economy literature that meaningfulness emerges from personal resonance rather than passive observation.

Additionally, the positive effect of EA on FEI broadens the applicability of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory within tourism. The findings indicate that high-authenticity cultural and historical environments do more than simply serve as physical settings; they can foster psychological conditions that enable visitors to experience deep attentional absorption, intrinsic enjoyment, and a diminished awareness of time during their visit. This suggests that authenticity in tourism is not limited to narratives, symbolic representations, or

destination imagery; rather, it functions as a core psychological mechanism that triggers a strong sense of experiential immersion. In other words, existential authenticity plays a pivotal role in helping tourists develop a meaningful connection with the place, become fully engaged in the moment, and derive deeper satisfaction from the overall heritage experience.

Ultimately, the integration of EA, SC, PTE, and FEI within a single SEM framework offers a coherent and multi-layered psychological perspective that strengthens theoretical understanding in heritage tourism research. Unlike previous studies that treated these constructs independently, the present model empirically demonstrates how existential authenticity serves as the foundational mechanism that shapes tourists' identity alignment, immersive involvement, and perceived experience quality. By revealing these interconnected pathways within heritage settings, the study provides a consolidated framework that enhances conceptual clarity and supports more comprehensive explanations of visitor engagement dynamics in culturally significant destinations.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study generate several practical implications for destination managers and heritage stakeholders. Initially, enhancing the authenticity of visitor experiences requires the development of meaningful cultural touchpoints. Narrative-based interpretation, guided heritage walks, and artisan demonstrations can strengthen visitors' perceptions of existential authenticity by facilitating deeper cultural engagement. Additionally, marketing strategies should be aligned with identity-related themes such as self-discovery, reflection, and cultural connection to reinforce self-congruity and increase the personal relevance of the destination.

Moreover, improving site organization and alleviating sensory and physical congestion may foster flow-like experiences, enabling visitors to engage more fully with the historical environment. Measures such as immersive route design, improved spatial orientation, and the reduction of environmental overload can contribute to experiential immersion. Besides, effective visitor density management remains essential in mitigating overtourism pressures. Strategies including pedestrianization, timed entry systems, and visitor dispersal to alternative heritage corridors can support both experiential quality and destination sustainability.

Finally, the preservation of heritage assets requires the continuous strengthening of conservation practices. Ensuring responsible visitor behavior and maintaining the integrity of architectural and cultural resources contribute not only to long-term heritage protection but also to the provision of meaningful, authenticity-driven experiences that align with the psychological needs highlighted in this study.

Practical Implications for Sultanahmet

Because Sultanahmet is one of Türkiye's most symbolically charged and historically layered heritage areas, the findings have several context-specific implications:

- The district's multi-layered religious and cultural heritage offers unique potential for identity-based and authenticity-driven storytelling.
- The presence of historical soundscapes, architectural forms, and ritualized cultural memory can be leveraged to support flow-like engagement.
- The widespread desire among visitors to stay in accommodation that reflects the "spirit of Sultanahmet" (70%) highlights the importance of heritage-aligned lodging design and preservation of traditional architectural forms.

Furthermore, while operational measures such as pedestrianization efforts, traffic restrictions, and congestion management remain necessary for sustainability, the current findings emphasize that these strategies should also be framed as tools to enhance experiential quality rather than merely preserve physical heritage.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The demonstrated interconnections among EA, SC, PTE, and FEI open up several meaningful pathways for further scholarly exploration.

Future studies should examine sustainability-oriented strategies for managing overtourism in dense heritage settings such as Sultanahmet, with particular attention to safeguarding historical and cultural values at risk of degradation. In addition, cross-cultural comparisons could investigate whether visitors' cultural backgrounds moderate the influence of authenticity on experience formation. Further comparative analyses of different types of authenticity may also identify which form exerts the strongest influence on experiential outcomes in dense urban heritage settings.

Additionally, the growing role of social media in shaping and performing authenticity warrants closer examination, particularly in disentangling how tourists construct "displayed authenticity" online versus the authenticity they privately experience on-site. Finally, future studies could explore how narrative transfer occurs through guided storytelling, assessing how tourists internalize layered historical accounts and incorporate them into their own identity narratives and sense of meaning during the heritage experience. Furthermore, future research could benefit from emotionally informed spatial analyses that map how visitors' moment-to-moment feelings evolve while navigating different micro-locations within the Sultanahmet

district, offering a deeper understanding of authenticity hotspots and emotional resonance zones.

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