

Destination Authenticity and Tourist Engagement as Drivers of Destination Attachment and Recommendation Intention: The Inhibiting Role of Perceived Risk in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: With the emergence of destinations and increasing competition in global tourism sector, the development of emotional attachment and goodwill advocacy among tourists has gained relevance importance. Based on a cognitive-affective-relational approach, this paper explores the impact of destination authenticity and tourist engagement on destination attachment and recommendation intentions and considers the limiting influence of perceived risk in Saudi Arabia. The proposed conceptual model is tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with the help of survey data carried out on 355 foreign and local tourists visiting Saudi Arabia. The findings show that destination authenticity is a significant cognitive antecedent, which boosts tourist engagement and creates tourist attachment directly. Tourist engagement can be identified as a primary affective-behavioral driver that has an impact on destination attachment and recommendation intention. Destination attachment, on the other hand, plays a significant part in influencing the intentions of the tourists to recommend the destination. Conversely, the influence of perceived risk on destination attachment and recommendation intention is quite negative, indicating that negative risk perceptions can disrupt relational bonding and advocacy despite having a positive experience. The mediation analysis also facilitates a series of stages where destination authenticity influences recommendation intention based on tourist interaction and destination attachment. A shift in emphasis to the issues of attachment and advocacy as essential concepts of destination success takes the field of destination marketing a step further by defining the success of a particular destination. The results can be beneficial to destination managers and policymakers, where authentic experience design, engagement-based strategies, and efficient risk communication play a crucial role in the realization of effective tourism development.

Keywords: Destination authenticity, Tourist engagement, Destination attachment, Recommendation intention, Perceived risk.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations are becoming increasingly competitive not only in terms of their infrastructure and the quality of services offered, but also in the psychological meanings that tourists place on places (Apriyanti, 2024). The modern-day destination marketing has thus taken into consideration the cognitive assessment of the destinations by tourists and how emotional connections and promotion behavior are derived from that evaluation (Crompton, 1979; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). In this respect, destination success extends beyond achieving satisfaction and begins to rely more on tourists' ability to become attached to a destination and determine to recommend it to others (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Styliadis, 2022). This type of recommendation behavior has gained a particularly powerful role, defining the image of a destination, credibility, and demand on a mass scale (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008).

Saudi Arabia is a good context to consider such dynamics in time and in strategic importance. The sector has opened fast, which has led to increased international visitation, but on the downside, the sector has triggered the desire to know how tourists perceive Saudi Arabia as a vacation spot. The cognitive evaluations of tourists (e.g., authenticity and safety) and affective reactions (e.g., engagement and emotional attachment) play an important role in determining whether the visitors transform into first-time consumers to become voluntary destination promoters through these emerging destination contexts (Di-Clemente et al., 2022).

In the studies of destination image, researchers have traditionally made a distinction between cognitive and affective aspects of assessment (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Researchers, however, claim that advertisement managers ought to consider more relational results, including destination attachment, which reflects the intensity of the psychological relationships that tourists form with places (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Williams and Vaske, 2003). Destination attachment indicates attitudes of emotional attachment, identity, and location and has been indicated to be a stronger predictor of advocacy behavior than satisfaction or revisit intention (Yuksel et al., 2010). In the case of an emerging destination such as Saudi Arabia, nurturing the sense of attachment might be especially relevant, since tourists might not be willing to revisit it immediately, but can still create much value by recommending it positively.

Two important elements play a central role in the perception of the development of such attachment: destination authenticity and tourist engagement. Destination authenticity is the beliefs of the destination and its experiences as a real, culturally based, and believable destination (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). The concept of authenticity has been suggested as one of the fundamental tourism values and a source of meaningful experience, especially in destinations that are heritage and culture-based (Olsen, K., 2002). High perceived authenticity leads to more interpretations of experiences as significant personally by tourists. Therefore, increasing emotional engagement and relationship bonding (Ramkissoon and Uysal, 2011). Authenticity is particular to Saudi contexts as cultural background, site-based cultural histories, and religious histories are predominant in tourism development.

Tourist involvement encompasses the psychological participation of the tourists and the type of involvement they have when they go to the place. Based on the customer engagement theory, engagement is the manifestation of attention, absorption, enthusiasm, and interaction (So et al., 2014). According to previous studies, engagement is a mediating factor between perception and behavioral outcomes contributing to higher attachment and advocacy (Brodie et al., 2011; Zhou and Yu, 2022).

Nevertheless, these positive judgments and interests can be compromised by the feeling of perceived risk, which refers to a subjective judgment of the tourists concerning the possible negative consequences related to travelling (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005). Risk perceptions may diminish psychological comfort, restrict interaction, and undermine emotional relationships even with positive conditions (Cui et al., 2016). Perceived risk management is necessary in maintaining the attachment and promoting positive recommendations in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Despite the increasing interest in authenticity, the construction of engagement and perceived risk has been applied in very limited studies that have combined them into a cognitive-affective framework. Hence, this research attempts to bridge the gap in the literature of destination marketing by explaining the joint effects of cognitive appraisals and affective involvement in a relational and behavioral outcome in an emerging destination setting, of tourists travelling to Saudi Arabia to provide policy-related outcomes to tourism strategy of Saudi Arabia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Destination Authenticity

The concept of destination authenticity has become a central pillar in tourism studies, particularly within the domains of heritage tourism, cultural tourism, and experiential tourism which can be viewed as the degree of perception of a destination and its attractions to tourists as being true, original, and loyal to its cultural or historical background (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). According to early theorists of tourism industry, tourists have a tendency towards seeking a more authentic experience by getting away to a world filled with imitation or a commodified atmosphere (MacCannell, 1973). On this basis, subsequent research defined authenticity as a subjective experience instead of an objective characteristic of a destination, influenced by the expectations of the tourists, the meaning they make, and the frames of reference (Wang, 1999).

This subjective dimension of authenticity is particularly relevant in destinations such as Saudi Arabia, where rapid tourism development coexists with deeply rooted cultural traditions and social norms. The empirical evidence has shown consistency where perceived authenticity has a positive effect on emotional response and relational outcomes of the tourists. As an example, Kolar and Zabkar (2010) have discovered that authenticity perceptions have a significant positive impact on satisfaction and

loyalty in the case of heritage tourism. On the same note, Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011) established that positive emotions created by authentic experiences enable tourists to develop a strong emotional attachment with destinations, initiating a sense of place attachment. More recently, it is pointing out that authenticity improves the emotional engagement and the psychological attachment of tourists to destinations by making the experiences more meaningful (Fang and Ko, 2025).

In emerging destinations, authenticity plays an additional strategic role by reducing uncertainty and signaling credibility. Tourists will tend to believe in the destination and perceive it as culturally valuable, as opposed to commercialized destinations, when they feel that a destination is genuine (Moore, et al., 2021). In Saudi Arabian context, authenticity is closely associated with heritage conservation, religious significance, and local traditions, all of which contribute to tourists' cognitive evaluations of destination value. As such, destination authenticity is positioned as a foundational cognitive construct that shapes tourists' engagement and longer-term relational bonds with the destination. Authenticity assists in adding to the perceived essence and trustworthiness of experiences, and involvement adds additional emotional capital by using interested participation and immersion.

2.2. Tourist Engagement

Tourist engagement can be viewed as an extension of customer engagement theory applied to tourism settings, reflecting the degree of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement exhibited by tourists during their travel experiences (So et al., 2014). Through engagement, in contrast to passive consumption, active involvement, absorption, and interaction with a range of aspects in the destination environment take place (Cheung, et al., 2023). Interactions between tourists and host countries can be in the form of engagement, which can be performed through behavioral aspects like interaction with the local community, involvement in cultural activities, and emotional immersion in the destination (Lao, Y., et al., 2023). studies stress that the phenomenon of engagement is a form of value co-creation, where the tourists and the destinations play a role in developing the whole experience (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Hence, tourists do not participate in a surface-based consumption but rather create a more profound experiential and emotional attachment. An increasing amount of empirical evidence points to the significance of involvement in the process of creating favorable tourism outcomes. For instance, a study by So et al. (2014) indicated that engaged tourists have a high level of brand loyalty and are more likely to get involved in positive word of mouth. Similarly, Zhou and Yu (2022) found that tourist engagement enhances loyalty through increased perceived value and satisfaction.

In a cognitive affective model, engagement becomes an important affective behavioral process that converts cognitive appraisals into outcomes of relationships. Once tourists believe that something is authentic, it is easier to engage in the experience, putting both emotional and cognitive resources to that end (Loureiro et al., 2022). Such greater involvement facilitates emotional attachment to tourists and the chances of creating lasting psychological relationships with the destination. Consequently, tourist engagement occupies a central position in understanding how authenticity-driven perceptions evolve into attachment and advocacy (Chen, 2023)

2.3. Destination Attachment

The emotional and mental connection achieved among tourists towards a place, including affection, belonging, and identification, is termed destination attachment (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Based on the place attachment theory, the concept of attachment to the destination reveals the level to which a destination is meaningfully attached to the tourist and becomes part of the self-concept (Yuksel et al., 2010). Destination attachment is a more profound relational outcome as opposed to satisfaction or revisit intention, which are evaluative or behavioral tendencies (Xu and Zhang, 2016). The attached tourists are not necessarily likely to return to a destination, except in cases of long-haul tourism or in an emerging tourism experience, but nonetheless express feelings to the destinations and exhibit supportive behaviors (Rollero and De Piccoli 2010).

Empirical research suggests that destination attachment is among the strongest predictors of the advocacy behaviors generated, such as positive word-of-mouth and destination endorsement (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Styliadis, 2022). Cognitive appraisals, as well as affective involvement, affect the development of destination attachment. In emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia, where many

visitors are first-time tourists, attachment may be a more realistic and valuable outcome than immediate repeat visitation. Attachment will help the destinations to create an emotionally committed visitor pool that will translate to long-term destination equity through advocacy (Xu and Zhang, 2016).

2.4. Recommendation Intention

Recommendation intention refers to tourists' willingness to endorse a destination to others through interpersonal communication or digital channel as a form of advocacy behavior, which plays a critical role in destination marketing, (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). The fact that recommendations are based on personal experience makes them appear to be more credible and influential than the usual promotional messages. Previous studies indicate that emotional attachment and relational commitment are the most potent forces behind the recommendation behavior (Rasoolimanesh, et al., 2021).

Emotionally bonded tourists will share more positive experiences about a destination that will attract more people to visit the destination and protect the image (Fullerton, 2005; Ramkissoon et al., 2013). In emerging destinations, recommendation intention is especially valuable as it accelerates image formation, reduces information asymmetry, and enhances destination credibility among potential visitors (Yuan and Vui 2023). Within this study, recommendation intention is positioned as the primary behavioral outcome reflecting the culmination of cognitive evaluation, affective engagement, and relational attachment. This is in line with the present views of destination marketing that lay stress on advocacy and related power as opposed to behavior repetition as a sole factor (Litvin et al., 2008; Ramkissoon et al., 2013).

2.5. Perceived Risk

Perceived risk refers to tourists' subjective evaluation of uncertainty and the possibility of negative outcomes associated with travelling to a destination (Cui et al., 2016). In tourism research, perceived risk typically encompasses concerns related to personal safety, health conditions, political stability, service reliability, and cultural unfamiliarity. Importantly, perceived risk does not necessarily reflect objective conditions at the destination; rather, it is shaped by individual perceptions, media representations, social discourse, and prior travel experience (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Empirical evidence indicates that perceived risk plays a significant role in shaping tourist behavior (Loi and Le, 2024). Hence, high levels of perceived risk have been shown to negatively influence destination choice, overall evaluation, and post-visit behavioral responses.

A study by Zheng et al., (2019) suggests that perceived risk affects relational outcomes by disrupting emotional comfort and cognitive focus. Thus, whenever tourists are preoccupied by safety-related issues or are unaware of what to expect, they will not be able to form emotional relationships with a destination. This implies that perceived risk may hinder the formation of destination attachment by interfering with the affective processes through which attachment develop (Cheng et al., 2022). In the context of Saudi Arabia, as a destination that has only recently opened to international leisure tourism, it may still be subject to outdated stereotypes or limited information among potential visitors. This kind of perception may live on even when objective levels of risk are minimal. Consequently, understanding the role of perceived risk is essential for interpreting how tourists cognitively evaluate the destination and how these evaluations influence emotional bonding and recommendation behavior.

2.6. Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Although destination authenticity, tourist engagement, and perceived risk have each been widely examined in tourism literature, several important gaps remain. First, although such results in previous studies are desirable, they might not reflect the depth of the psychological association of the tourists to destinations, especially in an emerging tourism setting. Second, relatively few studies have positioned destination attachment as a central relational outcome within a cognitive–affective framework. Hence, Destination attachment reflects a deeper and more enduring bond than satisfaction or behavioral intention, yet it remains underutilized in empirical destination marketing research. This is especially challenging in situations in which repeat visits might otherwise be limited due to either the distance to the destination, novelty-seeking behavior or the cost of travelling, and advocacy via recommendation is of high quality. Third, while tourist engagement has been recognized as an important affective behavioral construct (So et al., 2014; Cheung, et al., 2023), limited research has examined its role as a mechanism linking cognitive evaluations.

Finally, although perceived risk has been extensively studied as a determinant of destination choice and intention (Zheng et al., (2019; Cheng et al., 2022), its role as a psychological inhibitor of destination attachment and recommendation behavior has received comparatively less attention, particularly in emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia. Sealing these gaps, the current research formulates a multi-layered conceptual model that is based on the cognitive-affective theory. The framework proposes that destination authenticity shapes tourists' cognitive evaluations, which foster tourist engagement as an affective-behavioral response. Through engagement, tourists develop destination attachments, which subsequently enhances their willingness to recommend the destination. Perceived risk is incorporated as a negative cognitive factor that constrains attachment formation and advocacy. By integrating these constructs into a single empirical model and applying it to the Saudi Arabian tourism context, this study advances the understanding of how emerging destinations can build relational strength and advocacy through authentic experiences, active engagement and effective risk management.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1 shows the proposed model of the study. Based on the proposed hypotheses, a conceptual framework is developed which links destination authenticity, tourist engagement, destination attachment, perceived risk and recommendation intention. The model tackles a combination of both the cognitive and affective processes to describe the role of the beliefs and emotional engagement of the tourists in determining the relational and behavioral processes. Destination authenticity is positioned as a key cognitive antecedent influencing tourists' engagement and emotional bonding with the destination. Tourist engagement represents an affective-behavioral process that strengthens tourists' connection with the destination and facilitates the formation of destination attachment. Destination attachment is conceptualized as the central relational outcome of the framework, which in turn drives recommendation intention as a form of destination advocacy. Perceived risk is incorporated as an inhibitory cognitive factor that weakens destination attachment and reduces tourists' willingness to recommend the destination. Overall, the framework illustrates how positive cognitive and affective evaluations foster attachment and advocacy, while negative risk perceptions constrain these outcomes in emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia.

3.1. Destination Authenticity and Tourist Engagement

Destination authenticity represents one of the core cognitive evaluations through which tourists assess the genuineness and credibility of a destination. Tourists tend to have greater emotional attachment and become cognitively engaged in their experience when destination is perceived to be authentic (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). In a cognitive-affective sense, authenticity is an antecedent consciousness that directly causes both affective and behavioral reactions. Fang and Ko (2025) empirically proved that perceived authenticity is correlated positively with the increased level of tourist engagement by means of increased emotional interest and involvement. Authenticity is particularly salient in the Saudi Arabian context, where deeply rooted traditions coexist with rapid tourism development. Tourists are more likely to be attentive, curious and engaged when they perceive Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage, religious sites and local customs as authentic rather than staged or commercialized. Hence:

H1: Destination authenticity positively influences tourist engagement.

3.2. Destination Authenticity and Destination Attachment

Destination authenticity also plays a critical role in the formation of destination attachment. Destination attachment refers to the emotional and psychological bond that tourists develop with a place, encompassing feelings of affection, belonging and identification (Williams & Vaske, 2003). This is empirically substantiated by demonstrating that authenticity can play an important role in emotional bonding and place attachment under different conditions of tourism (Styliadis et al., 2017). In emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia, authenticity may be particularly influential in fostering attachment among first-time visitors. Experience of the real life encounters with the local culture, traditions and heritage sites can create profound emotional impressions that can then be used to build psychological attachment to the destination. Therefore:

H2: Destination authenticity positively influences destination attachment.

3.3. Tourist Engagement and Destination Attachment

Tourist engagement reflects the extent to which tourists are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally involved in their travel experiences. According to previous studies, engagement reinforces relational

outcomes as it boosts emotional intimacy and personal relevance (So et al., 2014). Zhou and Yu (2022) showed that engaged tourists have high emotions and commitment relationships with destinations. Psychologically, involvement enables the relationship to form attachments through the creation of emotional excitement, active processing, and self-involvement. In Saudi Arabian tourism context, tourists who actively engage with local culture, interact with residents, and immerse themselves in destination narratives are more likely to develop emotional attachment. Engagement is thus an imperative affective process by which cognitive perspectives are converted into connections (Lao, Y., et al., 2023). Hence:

H3: Tourist engagement positively influences destination attachment.

3.4. Tourist Engagement and Recommendation Intention

Tourist engagement also plays an important role in shaping post-visit behavioral outcomes, particularly recommendation intention (Loureiro et al., 2022). Recommendation intention reflects tourists' willingness to endorse a destination to others through interpersonal communication or digital platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The relationship marketing theory states that interaction reinforces relational commitment, which consequently results in advocacy behaviors including positive word-of-mouth (So et al., 2014). Empirical studies confirm that tourist engagement is a strong predictor of recommendation and advocacy behaviors (Harrigan et al., 2017; Zhou & Yu, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, where international tourism is still developing, engaged tourists can play a vital role in shaping destination image and credibility through recommendations. Their advocacy can reduce information asymmetry and influence potential visitors' perceptions, making engagement a key driver of recommendation intention. Thus:

H4: Tourist engagement positively influences recommendation intention.

3.5. Destination Attachment and Recommendation Intention

Destination attachment is widely recognized as a powerful predictor of advocacy behaviors, including recommendation intention. Emotionally attached tourists will be inclined to talk favorably about the place, protect its image, and make others visit it (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Attachment means a strong psychological commitment that triggers supportive behavior despite there being no plans of immediate revisit (Williams and Vaske, 2003). The existing literature has demonstrated that attachment yields great benefits in positive word-of-mouth and destination recommendation (Yuksel et al., 2010; Styliadis, 2022). In the context of Saudi Arabia, destination attachment can be particularly valuable because many tourists may not revisit frequently due to distance or novelty-seeking behavior. Nevertheless, emotionally attached visitors can still contribute to destination success by recommending Saudi Arabia to others, thereby supporting sustained tourism growth. Therefore:

H5: Destination attachment positively influences recommendation intention.

3.6. Perceived Risk and Destination Attachment

Perceived risk represents a cognitive judgement that can negatively influence tourists' emotional comfort and psychological involvement during travel. Previous research indicates that perceived risk negatively affects tourists' satisfaction, enjoyment, and emotional responses (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). More recently, Wei et al. (2024) found that perceived risk undermines destination attachment by reducing tourists' sense of security and emotional connection. In Saudi Arabia, perceived risk may persist among some tourists due to unfamiliar cultural norms or residual safety concerns shaped by media representations. Such perceptions can limit emotional immersion and hinder the formation of destination attachment, even when objective conditions are favorable. Therefore:

H6: Perceived risk negatively influences destination attachment.

3.7. Perceived Risk and Recommendation Intention

Perceived risk also exerts a direct influence on recommendation intention. Risk perceptions are hence acting as a psychological deterrent that discourages the behavior of recommendation (Cui et al., 2016). This relationship is always supported with empirical evidence. Reisinger and Mavondo (2005)

demonstrated that the travel related anxiety has a significant deprivation on the favorable behavioral intentions. Wei et al. (2024) further confirmed that perceived risk negatively affects recommendation through weakened emotional attachment. In emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia, managing perceived risk is thus essential for encouraging positive advocacy.

Consequently, perceived risk must be carefully addressed to support recommendation intention. Hence:

H7: Perceived risk negatively influences recommendation intention.

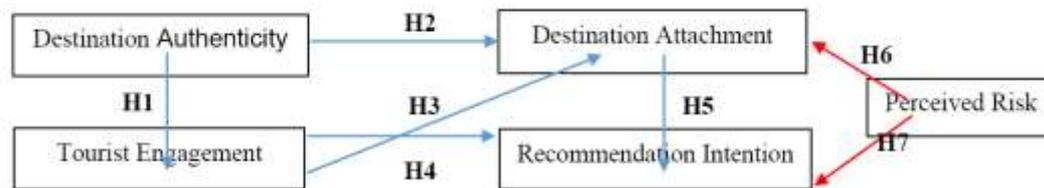


Figure 1. *The research model*

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to empirically examine the relationships among destination authenticity, tourist engagement, destination attachment, perceived risk and recommendation intention. The research design chosen was a survey-based study as the latent perceptual and behavioral constructs, which latency is most often explored in various studies on tourism and destination marketing, are typically investigated through quantitative research methodology (Hair et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed as the primary analytical technique. SEM can be used in testing very complex theoretical models with many interrelated constructs since it facilitates the estimation of both measurement and structural relationships together considering the measurement error (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

4.2. Measurement Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to provide information based on a two-section questionnaire. The first section captured respondents' demographic and travel-related characteristics, including age, gender, nationality, travel frequency and prior visits to Saudi Arabia. The second segment assessed the study constructs through pre-existing multi-item scales that were based on the earlier body of literature to have a sense of content validity. Destination authenticity was measured using items adapted from Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011). Tourist engagement was assessed using scales adapted from So et al. (2014) and Zhou and Yu (2022), capturing emotional involvement, attention and interaction. Destination attachment was measured using items drawn from place attachment literature (Williams & Vaske, 2003; Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Recommendation intention was assessed using established word-of-mouth and advocacy scales (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). Perceived risk was measured using items adapted from Reisinger and Mavondo (2005) and Cui et al. (2016). Items were measured on a scale of five points of Likert scale with 1 having the strongest disagree and 5 having the strongest agree.

4.3. Data Collection and Sampling

The target population comprised tourists who had visited Saudi Arabia for leisure purposes within the previous 12 months. To increase the generalizability of the results, both international and domestic tourists who were above the age of 18 years were included. This study utilized a non-probability convenience sampling technique and data was gathered in major tourist destinations, heritage sites, and stations, and transportation locations, online travel communities and social media sites in connection with Saudi tourism. The total number of collected questionnaires was 385 and 355 valid responses were retained after filtering out any incomplete and outliers. This sample size is not the minimal to conduct SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

4.4. Sample Profile

The latter sample was demographically reliable. The ratio of males to females was about 50:50 and the average age of the respondents was 33 years. The international tourists constituted almost 60 percent of

the sample, with Europe, Asia and North America countries being the major source markets and the rest were domestic tourists. Most respondents reported stays of three to seven days, and a substantial proportion indicated prior visits to Saudi Arabia.

4.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis of data was done in the two-step SEM method suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The first step was Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) which helped to determine the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) was used to test internal consistency, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to test convergent validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to determine discriminant validity. Second, the structural model has been estimated to test hypothesized relationships. There were numerous indices assessing the model fit such as χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, RMSEA and SRMR. Procedural correctives like respondent anonymity and meticulous wording of items were used to reduce the effects of common method bias.

5. FINDING AND RESULTS

5.1. Measurement Model Assessment

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to test the reliability and validity of the measurement model before the structural relationships were tested. All latent constructs included in the CFA were destination authenticity, tourist engagement, destination attachment, perceived risk and recommendation intention. An indication of the results was that the measurement model had a good fit for the data. All observed indicators were high loaded on their corresponding latent constructs, and the standardized factor loading on the constructs was more than the advised level of 0.60, which paves the way to state that the items were sufficient to represent their targeted constructs. Internal consistency reliability was established since the values of Cronbach alpha were found to be acceptable to high with the minimum of 0.70 being achieved. Moreover, every construct also exhibited Composite Reliability (CR) of at least 0.80 which also provides further measurement reliability. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to determine the convergent validity and all the values of AVE were greater than the suggested value of 0.50, meaning that a large share of variance was explained by the constructs as compared to measurement error. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to test discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE of individual constructs was bigger than the correlation of the other constructs, which validated that the constructs were distinct empirically. Overall, the measurement model revealed high psychometric performances, which were an effective basis for testing the structural relationships hypothesized in the conceptual framework.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Destination Authenticity (DA)	5.61	0.82	1				
2. Tourist Engagement (TE)	5.47	0.86	0.53**	1			
3. Destination Attachment (DAT)	5.58	0.8	0.48**	0.62**	1		
4. Recommendation Intention (RI)	5.42	0.91	0.44**	0.51**	0.68**	1	
5. Perceived Risk (PR)	2.83	0.94	-0.34**	-0.31**	-0.39**	-0.36**	1

Table 2. Construct Reliability

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Destination Authenticity	4	0.88	0.9	0.65
Tourist Engagement	6	0.91	0.93	0.69
Destination Attachment	4	0.89	0.91	0.72
Recommendation Intention	3	0.85	0.88	0.7
Perceived Risk	4	0.79	0.82	0.58

Table 3. Discriminant validity

Construct	DA	TE	DAT	RI	PR
DA	0.81				
TE	0.53	0.83			
DAT	0.48	0.62	0.85		
RI	0.44	0.51	0.68	0.84	
PR	-0.34	-0.31	-0.39	-0.36	0.76

5.2. Structural Model Evaluation

After the satisfactory evaluation of the measurement model, structural model was estimated to test the hypothesized relations. The overall goodness of fit of the structural model was acceptable with all the goodness of fit indices within acceptable levels ($\chi^2/df < 3.0$; CFI > 0.90 ; TLI > 0.90 ; RMSEA < 0.08 ; SRMR < 0.08). These values show that the given model reflects the structure of the underlying data well. The endogenous constructs were explained by the structural model at a significant level. Destination authenticity accounted for a significant proportion of variance in tourist engagement. Destination authenticity and tourist engagement jointly explained a large proportion of variance in destination attachment, while tourist engagement, destination attachment and perceived risk collectively explained a high level of variance in recommendation intention. These three values of explanatory power indicate the high predictive ability of the proposed cognitive-affective-relational framework.

Table 4. *Structural Model*

Index	Recommended	Obtained
χ^2 / df	< 3.00	1.92
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.95
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.94
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.051
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.047

Table 5. *R-SQUARE*

Endogenous Variable	R-SQUARE
Tourist Engagement	0.28
Destination Attachment	0.61
Recommendation Intention	0.73

5.3. Hypotheses Testing

According to *table 6*, the standardized path coefficients, t-values, and level of significance of the structural model tested the hypotheses. The findings suggest that all the hypothesized relationships were statistically significant and as expected. Destination authenticity was found to have a significant positive effect on tourist engagement, supporting the argument that tourists who perceive Saudi Arabia as an authentic destination are more emotionally and behaviorally involved in their experiences. This result indicates that authenticity is an essential cognitive antecedent that arouses curiosity, interest, and involvement. Destination authenticity also exhibited a significant positive effect on destination attachment, indicating that authentic perceptions directly contribute to the development of emotional and psychological bonds with the destination. Tourist engagement demonstrated a strong positive influence on destination attachment, confirming that emotionally and cognitively involved tourists are more likely to form meaningful relational ties with the destination. In addition, tourist engagement had a significant positive effect on recommendation intention, suggesting that engaged tourists are more inclined to advocate for the destination and share positive evaluations with others. Destination attachment emerged as a strong predictor of recommendation intention, indicating that tourists who feel emotionally connected to Saudi Arabia are more willing to recommend it to others. This finding highlights the significance of the concept of attachment as a relational process connecting the experience-related processes to advocacy behavior. Perceived risk was found to have a significant negative effect on destination attachment, demonstrating that elevated risk perceptions undermine tourists' emotional bonding with the destination. Perceived risk also negatively influenced recommendation intention, indicating that tourists who perceive higher levels of risk are less likely to endorse the destination to others, regardless of positive engagement or attachment.

Table 6. *Hypothesis Testing*

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Result
H1	DA \rightarrow TE	0.53	11.6	$<.001$	Supported
H2	DA \rightarrow DAT	0.21	4.2	$<.001$	Supported
H3	TE \rightarrow DAT	0.58	12.9	$<.001$	Supported
H4	TE \rightarrow RI	0.27	5.5	$<.001$	Supported
H5	DAT \rightarrow RI	0.61	13.4	$<.001$	Supported
H6	PR \rightarrow DAT	-0.33	-6.7	$<.001$	Supported
H7	PR \rightarrow RI	-0.29	-5.9	$<.001$	Supported

5.4. Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis

Indirect effects were tested by using a bootstrapping procedure to investigate other underlying mechanisms of the proposed model. The results as shown in *table 7* revealed that tourist engagement partially mediated the relationship between destination authenticity and destination attachment. This observation indicates that authenticity enhances attachment in a direct or indirect way as a result of heightened interactions. In addition, destination attachment partially mediated the relationship between tourist engagement and recommendation intention. It means that although engagement directly facilitates advocacy behavior, much of the impact of these two qualities acts further through the establishment of emotional attachment. Moreover, a significant serial mediation effect was observed, whereby destination authenticity influenced recommendation intention through tourist engagement and destination attachment in sequence.

These mediation findings support the proposed cognitive-affective-relational process, demonstrating that cognitive evaluations (authenticity) stimulate affective-behavioral responses (engagement), which subsequently foster relational bonding (attachment) and lead to behavioral advocacy (recommendation intention).

Table 7. *Indirect Effects*

Indirect Path	Effect	95% CI	Interpretation
DA → TE → DAT	0.31	[0.23, 0.40]	Significant mediation
TE → DAT → RI	0.35	[0.26, 0.46]	Significant mediation
DA → TE → DAT → RI	0.19	[0.13, 0.27]	Serial mediation

6. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to develop and empirically test an integrated cognitive-affective-relational framework explaining how destination authenticity, tourist engagement and perceived risk shape destination attachment and recommendation intention in the context of Saudi Arabia. The revisit-based and experiential results are left behind, bringing the study to the next level of destination marketing research by including attachment and advocacy outcomes as key measures of destination success in an emerging tourist destination market. Overall, the findings are contributed well to the proposed study framework, and they do have a range of valuable theoretical and practical insights.

First, the findings reveal that authenticity of destinations is a central factor in influencing the psychological reactions of the tourists. The fact that destination authenticity has a considerable positive impact on tourist engagement confirms the assumption that authenticity is one of the main cognitive assessments that arouse emotional and behavioral involvement of tourists. This observation is consistent in the light of other studies that have indicated authentic cultural and heritage dimensions amplifying the inquisitiveness, fascination and immersion of tours among others (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Fang and Ko, 2025). Apparently, in the context of the Saudi Arabia where the development of tourism is taking place, and a strong sense of cultural and religious practices is prevalent, authenticity seems to hold a particularly dominant role in motivating tourists to become active participants in the destination rather than mere spectators. Besides the indirect influence in terms of engagement, destination authenticity was also identified to have a direct positive impact on destination attachment meaning that authentic perceptions play a role in emotional attachment without the involvement of behavioral practice. This observation confirms the argument that authenticity promotes the symbolic and emotional meaning of the destinations, which is gradually more personally effective to the tourists (Ramkissoon and Uysal, 2011; Styliadis et al., 2017). This observation is particularly important to destinations that are currently developing, such as Saudi Arabia, as it implies that even first-time visitors can be psychologically connected to authenticity, enhancing the relational outcomes at the early stage of the destination-tourist relationship. Second, the findings show that the role of tourist involvement is a significant affective-behavioral motivation in the proposed framework. This corroborates the earlier studies which have identified engagement as a key factor in the relational outcomes with service and tourism environments (So et al., 2014; Zhou and Yu, 2022). Passionate tourists are more conscious, emotional and engaged and this makes destinations experience bind internally and emotional connections. The possibility of acquiring cultural experience, getting to know the locals and their engagement in the heritage within the Saudi tourism setting appears to be among the determining elements to transform the positive images into the emotional impact. Third, destination attachment was

also found to be a strong predictor of recommendation intention, which validates its core position in advocacy behavior. The tourists who had deep emotional attachments to Saudi Arabia were much more likely to refer others to the country. This result is in line with the theory of place attachment and empirical evidence indicating that attachment is a better and more stable indicator of advocacy compared to beliefs in satisfaction or repetition of behavior (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). Importantly, this result reinforces the strategic value of attachment in emerging destinations, where repeat visitation may be constrained by distance, novelty-seeking behavior or travel costs, but where recommendation remains highly influential in shaping destination image and demand. By focusing on recommendation rather than revisit intention, the study contributes to a growing stream of research that emphasizes advocacy as a key outcome of destination competitiveness (Apriyanti, M.E., 2024).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, where international perceptions are yet to be formed, visitors with emotional attachments may act as credible promoters of positive news and enhance tourism development in the long run. Fourth, the findings attest to the inhibitory function of the perceived risk in the formation of the relational and behavioral outcomes. The research revealed that perceived risk has a negative effect on both destination attachment and recommendation intention, meaning that it weakens the emotional attachment of tourists and intention to recommend the destination. This result is aligned with other studies that show that the perception of risk leads to anxiety and interferes with emotional comfort, thus undermining the results of the relations (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005; Cui et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2024). Perceived risk has a negative effect especially in Saudi Arabia. The perception of danger may be latent due to the foreign culture or misrepresentation of the same in the media with the significant changes in the infrastructure, administration and guest services. The findings suggest that high risk perceptions can also suppress attachment development and discourage advocacy in case of high authenticity and engagement. This highlights the value of psychological barriers as well as experience improvement in the emerging destinations (Cheng et al., 2022).

Finally, the mediation analysis provides more evidence to the suggested order of cognitive-affective-relational. The results support the idea that authenticity directly and indirectly affects advocacy since it turns out to be influenced by engagement and attachment. A combination of these effects of mediation shows that there is a logical chain following which the influence of affects and behaviors caused by cognitive measurements leads to the development of emotional attachment and, further on, advocacy behavior. In general, the results add to the existing destination marketing literature evidence by revealing that destination success in new markets cannot be achieved through only the provision of desirable experiences, but also the formation of authentic impressions, active activities, perceived risk minimization and the development of essential emotional relationships that drive tourists to suggest the destination to others. These insights demonstrate that it is necessary to develop tourism strategies with the focus on relational strength and advocacy in addition to the infrastructure development and quality of services.

7. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study contributes to the current literature in tourism and destination marketing in many aspects. For instance, it improves the research of destination image since it integrates both cognitive and affective evaluation into the explicable system of comprehension not restricted to the satisfaction or revisit outcomes. The research gives a better insight into how beliefs and emotional involvement of the tourists can be translated into relational and advocacy by showing that destination authenticity, tourist engagement and perceived risk interact to determine destination attachment and recommendation intention. Moreover, the findings extend authenticity research by positioning destination authenticity as an active cognitive mechanism rather than a static destination attribute. According to empirical research, authenticity leads to an increase in tourist engagement and attachment to the destination, which in turn enhances emotional attachment to the destination (Fang and Ko, 2025). This view adds value to the current theory through the relevant dynamic role of authenticity in promoting relational value. Besides, it advances the existing knowledge of engagement theory by providing empirical evidence to support tourist engagement as a vital affective-behavioral process, which transcends the perceived mental state and perceptual relationships to impact outcomes. Further, by incorporating perceived risk into the model, the study responds to calls for a more balanced treatment of positive and negative cognitive appraisals in tourism behavior research (Wei et al., 2024). In addition, the research contributes to the

depth of theory-based, SEM-based literature on Saudi Arabia as an up-and-coming tourist destination, which will be useful in future destination marketing studies in the fast-growing tourism environment.

These results have also numbers of significant implications for destination managers and policymakers. First, destination competitiveness should be centered on authentic experience design. The preservation of cultural diversity, whereby individuals are given an opportunity to engage within the local area instead of being over-commodified can make the perception of authenticity more significant among the tourists. Subsequently, stir more interest, which enhances the perception of greater emotional attachment to the place. Second, destination interested parties will likely be keen to motivate tourist participation in the form participatory and immersive experiences. Cultural workshops, guided heritage tourism and community-based tourism, interactive online services and platforms can be used to foster emotional involvement and participation. These engagement-oriented strategies will most likely help in the establishment of destination attachment and make the tourists more willing to recommend Saudi Arabia to others. Third, perceived risk management must be subjected to a strategic priority. The uncertainty and fear among tourists could be reduced with the help of effective communication, noticeable safety measures, availability of travel information and frequent international messages. Reduction of perceived risk contributes to emotional attachment as well as raising the confidence of the tourists in referring to another destination. Collectively, these strategies can assist Saudi Arabia in moving beyond initial visitation growth, towards sustainable tourism development built on emotional attachment, positive advocacy and a credible international destination image.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations that this study can be exposed to, which can be used in future research. First, the cross-sectional research design does not allow making strong causal conclusions. Longitudinal research might be done to find out how the socio perception of authenticity, engagement and attachment to a destination change over time and the effect of such change to advocacy behavior.

Second, the research is based on self-reported findings, which can be biased towards responses. A way through which future studies could include behavioral data to complement perceptual measures is by using actual data on online recommendation behavior or online engagement measures. Third, while the current model includes destination authenticity, engagement and perceived risk, future studies could extend the framework by incorporating additional cognitive and affective constructs, such as destination trust, perceived value or emotional arousal. Lastly, the generalizability of the findings might be improved by conducting comparative studies in other destinations or cultures. Other possible moderate variables explored in future research include prior experience of travelling, cultural distance or tourist motivations to explain heterogeneity in the response of tourists.

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