

A global study of heritage site ecology, proclivity & loyalty



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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the interplay of heritage site ecology namely tangible, intangible and cultural ecologies, on tourist loyalty towards heritage sites. This research conceives of the heritage site as choice environment open to tourist interactions that allow tourists to form a belief function that impacts their sense of affect and subsequently drives their intentions of conative loyalty towards heritage sites. Given the nature of heritage site as accommodating prior knowledge about heritage, we forward the concept of heritage proclivity as moderating affect and loyalty. Based on survey data collected in the US, UK, Europe and China, this research finds overall support for the model with mixed results for heritage proclivity, surfacing disparities in attitudes and intentions of global tourists.

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1. Introduction and motivation

Heritage tourism is “the link between the preservation of the past for its intrinsic value, and as a resource for the modern community as a commercial activity” (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990: 24). Thus, heritage tourism has come to encompass tourism associated with (i) tangible built structures (e.g. Laws, 1998), (ii) intangible experiences (Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006) and (iii) culture and tradition (Poria et al., 2006; Richards, 1996) central to a heritage site. However, “very little research considers the relationship between the tourist and the space visited” (Poria et al., 2006, p. 162). Nasser (2003: 471) points out that while “heritage is the most modern phase of conservation”, ambiguity lies from missing the link between heritage site ecology and tourist loyalty in light of tourist expectations, affect and intentions.

Notwithstanding the rich body of heritage tourism research, a common theme in heritage tourism research has been an established corpus on an *a posteriori*, supply-centric investigation of tourists visiting heritage tourism. Yet, not much has been done in terms of *a priori* demand orientation – a consumer-centric model that surfaces the activity and process of tourists' conative loyalty. The supply-centric argument is underpinned by an assumption that “if you build it, they will come”. Therefore, supply-centric “heritage

sites” focus more on the legitimacy of the tourist site based on tourism that has been “inherited” with central emphases on monuments, art, culture, and natural landscapes. However, in a competitive landscape, this supply-centric assumption is open to scrutiny. As Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) remark, “the understanding and management of heritage tourism as a social phenomenon should not be based solely on an arbitrary factor: the presence of tourists”. In a shrinking and competitive global world, tourist choices are rapidly expanding and heritage tourism can no longer rely on a predominant supply-centric argument. Heritage tourism, as both a product and a service, has to evolve in tune with consumer interests.

The tourist, as a consumer of tourism, “is characterized as interacting with his or her choice environment, seeking and taking information from various sources, processing this information, and then making a selection”. The choice heritage environment presented to tourists a tangible structure, an intangible experience and the cultural significance of the time period in which it was created and of the current time period when it is being experienced. Although many heritage sites are defined by the structures themselves, or the structures surrounding the space, the true experience of a heritage space also includes intangible and cultural experiences relative to the actual space. In summary, heritage site planning is synthetic, combining historical architecture along with socio-cultural dimensions that contribute towards the ecological milieu.

Whether it is managing an existing site or planning a strategic change or development, heritage tourism requires strategic

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planning with requisite considerations of tourists' social-psychological needs and perceptions to drive the planning and management of heritage tourisms (Poria et al. 2006).

So what is the systematic process by which tourists' expectations influence their perceptions that will eventually shape their intentions? In addressing the question, the paper challenges the supply-centric view of heritage tourism as a site-driven activity to propose a demand-centric ideographic view of heritage tourism as a tourist-driven activity. This research surfaces how heritage site ecology drives the calculus of tourist beliefs, attitudes and intentions. This research also introduces heritage proclivity as a moderator linking heritage tourist affect and behavioral intentions (conative loyalty). Using data collected from a global study of tourists, we empirically investigate our hypothesized interrelationships between heritage site ecology, proclivity, affect and conative loyalty intentions.

2. Theory and framework

This research uses *activity theory* to underpin the characteristics that shape tourist expectations in heritage tourisms and *theory of reasoned action (TRA)* to underpin the process by which behavioral expectations in tourists are translated into attitudes and intentions.

Activity Theory (Leont'ev 1981) relies on symbolic interactions between two or more entities and conceptualizes psychological development and behavior as a function of the process of social interaction of an entity (e.g. tourist) within particular historical and cultural contexts. The theory contends that it is the extent to which an individual can engage via activities that determines the quality of the individual's experience. In that vein, a tourist's expectations, perceptions and intentions are defined by their sense of symbolic interaction with tangible and intangible heritage artifacts in heritage tourisms. The heritage tourist beliefs (the *object*) meaningfully interacts with the heritage site (the *subject*) through the design and planning of the heritage site with immersive heritage site characteristics (the *tool*) for *mediated* tourist interactions. For example, a heritage tourist visiting Dachau-the first Nazi concentration camp north of Munich, reworked its tourist experience in 2003. The reworking was activity-driven – characterized by immersive (i) tangible elements such as concrete renditions of barracks, (ii) intangible elements such as presentations on notable prisoners and (iii) cultural landscape elements such as the gritty

and brutal camp layout for characteristic activities such as tourists being able to relive the path depicting the arrival and treatment of new prisoners. The ability of a heritage tourism to meaningfully learn and interact with the history, culture and ecology in core to understanding perceptions and praxis of heritage tourism.

While activities serve to underpin symbolic interactions, we need to understand the mechanics that traces (i) how tourist expectations of heritage site contribute towards updating perceptions of affect towards heritage sites and (ii) the consequence of perceptions on behavioral intentions of conative loyalty. To understand the process, we draw upon a strain of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) Theory of reasoned Action (TRA) as the foundational model. TRA simply states that any human behavior or intention depends on the intention to perform that behavior and that the intention is shaped by the attitude (A). Using conative loyalty as a manifestation of intention is useful in tourism research because it allows the tourist to feel a sense of prolonged engagement with the heritage site that could not only lead to multiple visits but also allow them to recommend others to visit the site (Fig. 1).

3. Model overview and development

3.1. Heritage site ecology

The tourist product is a composite product – an “amalgam or a “package” consisting of several components. This amalgam or package consists of tangible, intangible and cultural landscape elements. These components complement each other as a mix: a functionally interdependent portfolio with value-added benefits sought by tourists. This amalgam of elements contributes toward the tourist experience. In activity theory, this interdependent mix allows for *mediated action* where the relation between the tourist and the heritage site is mediated by tangible, intangible and cultural landscape elements to create a context “that which weaves together” the heritage tourist experience.

Embodied in activities, the core of heritage tourisms offers a unique “immersive” tourist experience that combines different tourism services that aim to offer a tourism experience. The Heritage tourism sites embody (i) physical dimensions such as landmarks, monuments and other cultural elements (e.g. archaeological pieces); (ii) perceptual and cultural dimensions such as the history, the arts (e.g. etchings, music, visual renditions); and (iii) ambience

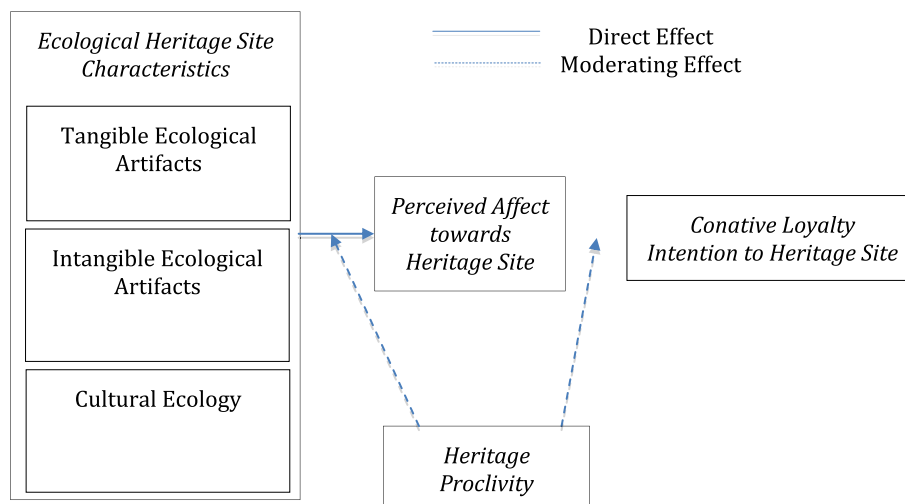


Fig. 1. Depicts the basic model.

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