

Original Research Article

## Exploring the Indicators of Cultural Differences in Tourists' Perceived Authenticity of the Destination (Case Study :Chinese and German Nationals)\*

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**Abstract** | The present study aims to explore and understand the indicators for cultural differences in tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination. This research was conducted using a qualitative and quantitative approach. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with industry and academic experts (N=18) who were purposefully selected. Then, the quantitative examination of the findings was done by distributing questionnaires among Chinese and German nationalities (N=200). Based on the qualitative findings of the research, nine main themes and 28 sub-themes were obtained from interviews with experts regarding the indicators affecting tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination. In the next step, the findings were analyzed by distributing a questionnaire among 200 Chinese and German nationalities. First, the model which was presented for tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination, shows that the perceived authenticity between these two sample populations is mainly different. For Germans, authenticity means visible originality, integrity, and historical antiquity. However, the unique experience impacts the Germans' perceived authenticity of the destination. In contrast, the Chinese often associate authenticity with unique experiences rather than simply the historical antiquity or integrity of the destination. The difference in these perceptions can be rooted in cultural values, historical narratives, and political approaches prevailing in these countries. In addition, the finding shows that external factors, such as the media portrayal of the destination and diplomatic relations between the country of origin and the destination, are influential in shaping these perceptions.

**Keywords** | Cultural differences, perceived authenticity, China, Germany, Inbound tourism.

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of Dr. "Seyed Mojtaba Mahmoudzadeh" and advisement of Dr. "Mahdi Karoubi" and Dr. "Esmail Ghaderi" at Faculty of Management and Accounting, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran.

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**Introduction** | Tourism has had a significant impact on the economic growth of many countries, and by creating strategic opportunities, it has diversified the local economy, created jobs, and, as a result, generated income for the local community. Today's tourists have higher education and have traveled more. They want a better quality of life and thus desire more authentic experiences (Yeoman et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2018). In a world that is moving towards globalization understanding the motivations and factors that hinder the travel of tourists with different cultural backgrounds is essential for tourism decision-makers and tour operators (Farhadi Mohali, 2011). Despite Iran's unique diversity and historical and natural landscape, Iran's tourism faces many issues. Political and economic sanctions, excessive reliance on oil revenues, slow pace of infrastructure development, the concentration of industries and services in a few large cities, cultural and religious considerations, limited advertisement in the media, and the need to train professionals are among the most essential challenges of the tourism industry in Iran (Rasulzadeh Aghdam et al., 2016). Iran and China have had many cultural exchanges since the distant past. This cultural exchange also exists in the case of Iran and Germany. Due to its location between the two civilizations of the East and the West, the Iranian Plateau has always been a boundary and a route for the passage and flow of cultures from both sides of the globe to each other.

However, with this strategic location and rich history, Iran has been less successful in attracting cultural tourists from other countries in comparison with other similar destinations. Several factors influence the formation of Iran's image among German tourists, including political climate, tourism advertising, general attitude toward the destination, ruling atmosphere, infrastructure, culture, history, etc (Raji, 2020). According to Ali Akbar Mounesan, Iran's former tourism minister, Iran's share of China's outbound tourism market was only 1,700 Chinese tourists annually in 2018 (Jalalvand, 2019). This is even though the political relations between Iran and China have improved, as well as the motivation of Chinese tourists to travel to cultural destinations (Hajinejad et al., 2013). Policymakers at the country's macro level of tourism should have paid more attention to the attraction of Chinese cultural tourists as one of the target markets in the world. Moreover, meeting the expectations of Chinese tourists would lead to loyalty and, as a result, recommendations to others, word-of-mouth advertising, and re-visiting the destination (Purfaraj et al., 2013).

Tourists prefer to buy tour packages that bring them

an authentic experience, so the authenticity makes the destination more attractive (Liao & Chuang, 2020). Meanwhile, one of Iran's challenges in inbound tourism is the need for more diversity in the travel packages offered to tourists. The classic route is always offered in the same way and by visiting the same sites to different nationalities regardless of their motivations, expectations, and perceived authenticity. The collection of these observations leads to the main question of this research: What are the indicators of perceived authenticity of the destination by tourists? Is there a difference between the perceived authenticity of Chinese and German nationalities as two sample populations?

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Authenticity

The concept of authenticity deals with various factors that influence the formation of the tourist's perception and expectations about the destination. Therefore, achieving a universal definition of authenticity in tourism is a complicated path (Costa & Bamossy, 2001). Until 1972, authenticity in its original sense was applied to museum objects. Authenticity was defined as whether museum objects are what they claim to be as a matter of value. Here, a museum object could be original or non-original (copy aka fake). The term was borrowed from the philosophy of authenticity for museum objects (Trilling, 2009). McConnell was one of the first researchers to raise the idea of authenticity in tourism. According to McConnell, modernization of business relations, history, and nature have separated man from his traditional roots and made him a consumer of cultural products and experiences. The modern man has lost his connection to family, workplace, neighborhood, and hometown - which he once considered himself a part of - and at the same time, has become attracted to the "real life" of others (MacCannell, 2013). Some researchers also believe that using the concept of authenticity as the foundation of contemporary tourism seems a bit simplistic due to the complexities involved in tourism of our time (Urry, 1991). However, in historical, cultural, and heritage tourism, which is related to the concept of "other" and the past, authenticity is still relevant. For encountering different cultures and nations included in tour programs, authenticity is like a label given to the destination's culture, according to the cognitive images and stereotyped expectations of the society that the tourist is visiting (Ning, 2017). Therefore, authenticity is the actualized embodiment of the tourist's beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotypical images, and

speculations about the “other” in the tour program (Adams, 1984, Bruner, 1991, Duncan, 2014, Laxson, 1991, Silver, 1993).

#### • Culture

Culture impacts all aspects of individual behavior in a society. For the past three decades, researchers have asked people to prioritize various values as guiding principles in their lives. Through analyzing these rankings, we have learned that the structure of human values is very similar in more than 80 countries of the world (Schwartz, 1992, Borg et al., 2011). At the same time, there are special characteristics that make people of one country appear culturally different from the other. Anyhow, achieving global peace is one of the goals of tourism, and it results in conflicts being largely resolved. At least between countries that exchange tourists, it leads to cultural solidarity (Karoubi, 2009). In destinations with intercultural differences between tourists and the local community, these differences have been considered a factor in developing tourism in that region (Homayoun, 2007, Vossoughi & Khoshnamak, 2015).

### Research background

Some consider authenticity to be the essential characteristic of objects, events, or places visited, and some think that its origin is the perception and experience of tourists (Bapiri, 2024). Ning's research findings (Ning, 2017) emphasize that authenticity in the tourism experience needs to be reviewed. Some research findings show that the destination's brand authenticity, intrapersonal authenticity, and existential authenticity positively affect love for the destination brand (Haq et al., 2024). Existential authenticity affects the destination's emotional and cognitive images, while objective authenticity only affects the cognitive image (Dong et al., 2023). Other research proves that structural authenticity and historical reconstruction have a significant positive relationship with a positive attitude toward the experience in the destination (Gardiner et al., 2022). On the other hand, it should be considered that the perceived authenticity in the West is different from the perceived authenticity in the Eastern culture, and there is a need to localize the indicators of perceived authenticity according to the culture of the countries (Cheng et al., 2024).

Iran needs to introduce its cultural resources to other nationalities to attract tourists (Hoshyarhassan Barouq & Badli Soha, 2013). In fact, racial and cultural differences are effective in attracting tourists and developing tourism (Sobhaninia, 2018). Research conducted on authentic tourism in Scotland

showed that to achieve the tourism development goal of the country, “authenticity” is a key factor in the future. However, if authenticity is supposed to be a serious statement in tourism, it should be based on ethics, nature, honesty, simplicity, and beauty and rooted in human concepts (Yeoman et al., 2007). Another point is that the positive experience affects the guests' perception of authenticity and engagement with the destination (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2023). In the sample of this research, which was conducted on tourists residing in one of the famous and luxurious hotels, the findings showed that the more authentic the accommodation brand, the more customers are willing to go for it. Based on the literature review conducted in the field of tourism authenticity, which will be the subject of this article, no research has been found to explore the indicators and variables that are effective in influencing tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination. Also, no research has been found to compare the cultural differences in the perceived authenticity of Chinese and German nationalities.

### Research Methodology

The present research seeks to explain the indicators of tourists' perceived authenticity of destinations by conducting a comparative study and localizing conventional methods. This research employed applied case-based research, in which relevant information and data were collected from tourism experts to conclude a comprehensive understanding of culture, perceived authenticity, and tourism. After analyzing the findings, a suitable impact model was presented.

#### • Qualitative section

To collect data, aside from using library studies and theoretical foundations derived from content analysis, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to further understand the research topic. In the first stage, the theoretical foundations and background related to the subject were extracted, analyzed, and compiled systematically. The main goal of this stage of the research was to explore the categories related to the tourists' perceived authenticity of the destination. Therefore, firstly, the desired indicators were extracted through content analysis and in-depth and exploratory interviews individually with academic and industry experts who were selected purposefully. The necessary qualitative data were collected and identified using the thematic analysis method. After this stage, based on the indicators, the desired model was designed. Due to the limited number of experts with opinions about the research topic, the experts were determined at first by classifying the statistical population and then by

the snowball method. The sample size was based on the principle of saturation, and in this research, the results were satisfying after interviewing 18 experts in the field of tourism industry and academia. The age range of the experts was between 34 and 67 years, and the average work experience was 14 years. Also, 72% of the participants in the research were men. 12 of the experts were professors of Iranian and foreign universities in the field of tourism, and 6 of the experts were active in the tourism industry as tour operators and tour guides. In this research, the coding pattern was used based on the approach arising from the data at the open level. Based on this, using Maxqda 10 software, a preliminary model was discovered; based on coding in this part of the research, the main components were identified, and a final qualitative model was designed.

**• Quantitative section**

A questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms and WeChat to obtain quantitative data, and 200 people from Chinese and German nationalities participated (100 per nationality). Of these, 62% of all participants were male, and 38% were female. The values of the questionnaire were designed based on a 5-point Likert scale with a score between 1 and 5 based on the main and subcategories of the research, where the highest score was “completely agreed”, and the lowest score was “completely disagreed”. The questionnaires were excluded from the research if they were not fully completed. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed to test the normality of the dataset, and the Statistical significance was less than 0.001, meaning the indicators’ distribution is equivalent.

**Findings**

In the qualitative part derived from the analysis of the interviews, all the variables were extracted, and

the codes related to each category were explored and analyzed. The qualitative findings led to the extraction of hypotheses and the presentation of the initial proposed model for this research. At first, the indicators were extracted from the interview by coding method and then were detailed in Tables 2 & 3 with themes and subcategories. Then, in the second part, the proposed model was tested by distributing questionnaires among the two sample populations.

**• Qualitative findings: indicators of tourists’ perceived authenticity of the destination**

Based on the investigated findings, 9 main themes and 28 sub-themes were obtained from the expert interviews, as shown in Table 1 Based on the repetition of the themes in Fig. 1, visible originality has the highest frequency of repetition. After that, integrity (intactness), cultural originality, unique experience, and brand artifacts of destinations are other important factors in the perceived authenticity of the destination by tourists.

Based on the obtained qualitative data, the following 9 hypotheses were proposed as research hypotheses, resulting in the conceptual model shown in Fig. 2:

1. H1: Visible authenticity effectively influences tourists’ perceived authenticity.
2. H2: Unique experience is effective in tourists’ perceived authenticity.
3. H3: Cultural originality of destination positively impacts the perceived authenticity of tourists.
4. H4: The ancient history of the destination has a positive effect on the tourists’ perceived authenticity of the destination.
5. H5: The integrity of the destination is effective in the tourist’s perceived authenticity of the destination.
6. H6: Symbols affect the tourists’ perceived authenticity of the destination.

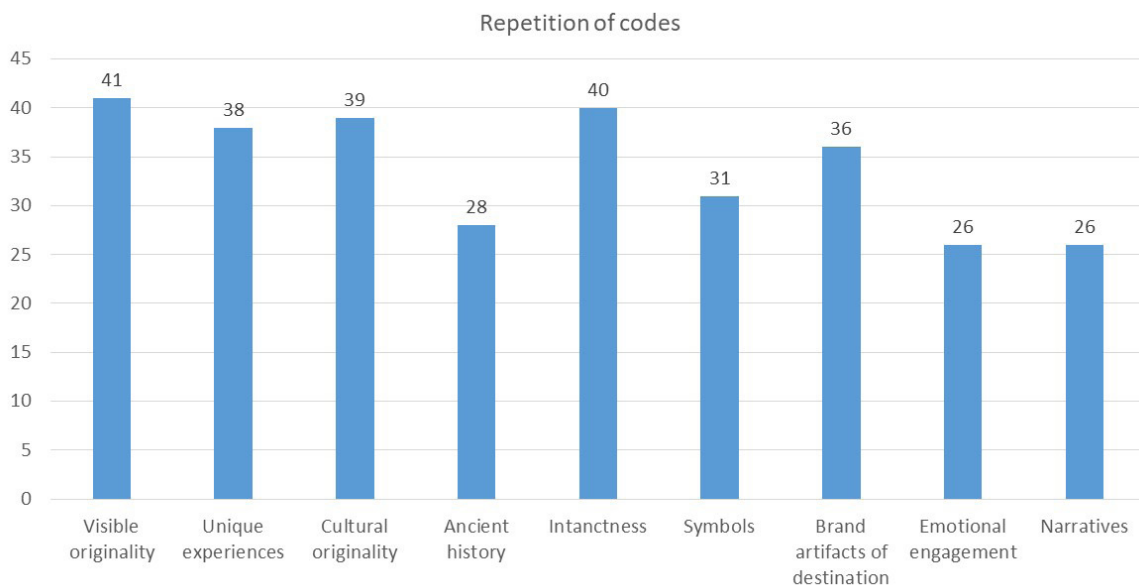


Fig.1. Repetition of each code in Maxqda. Source: Authors.

Table 1. The indicators for perceived authenticity of destination. Source: Authors.

Dependent indicator	Main Theme	Codes	Repetition
Tourists' perceived authenticity of destination	Visible originality	Reputation	18
		Total number	6
		Real sense	10
		Credibility	7
	Unique experience	Different experience	10
		Familiar experience	16
		Special interpretation	12
	Cultural originality	Local customs	19
		Harmony of local people with nature	13
	Ancient history	Special events	7
		Historical value	17
		Historical climate	6
		Historical ethnic groups	5
	Integrity	Inviolability	23
		Natural sites	5
	Symboles	Preservation of identity	12
		Ethnic symbol	9
		National symbol	14
	Brand artifacts of destination	Religious symbols	8
		Monuments	18
		Handicrafts	9
	Emotional engagement	Local art	9
		Emotional similarity of origin and destination (nostalgia)	14
Sense of belonging to the destination		5	
Sense of empathy with the destination		7	
Narratives of previous tourists		13	
Narratives	Image of the destination in the media	8	
	Diplomatic relations of origin and destination	5	

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all data in the measurement model. Source: Authors.

Dependent indicator	Indicators	Themes	Number	Average	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's alpha	Ave
Perceived authenticity of destination	Visible originality	Reputation	200	4.05	-0.269	-0.932	0.921	0.799
		Total number	200	4.175	-0.515	-0.399		
		Real sense	200	3.86	-0.206	-0.441		
	Unique experience	Credibility	200	3.96	-0.152	-0.663	0.826	0.654
		Different experience	200	3.805	0.064	-0.469		
		Familiar experience	200	3.86	0.004	-0.276		
	Cultural originality	Special interpretation	200	4	-0.111	-0.255	0.765	0.761
		Local customs	200	4.155	-0.947	0.499		
		Harmony of local people with nature	200	4.17	-0.885	-0.151		
	Ancient history	Special events	200	4.185	-0.992	0.192	0.702	0.537
		Historical value	200	3.84	-0.281	0.57		
		Historical climate	200	3.8	-0.367	0.46		
	Integrity	Historical ethnic groups	200	3.8	-0.193	0.071	0.814	0.621
		Conservation	200	4.32	-0.98	-0.277		
		Natural site	200	4.355	-0.988	-0.134		
	Symbols	Preservation of identity	200	4.36	-0.909	-0.7	0.782	0.561
		Ethnic symbol	200	3.93	-0.502	0.68		
		National symbol	200	3.92	-0.162	-0.907		
		Religious symbols	200	3.82	-0.479			
Monuments		200	3.76	-0.538	0.472			
Handicrafts		200	3.745	-0.606	0.762			
Local art		200	3.645	-0.747	0.287			
Brand artifacts of destination	Emotional similarity of origin and destination (nostalgia)	200	4.305	-0.834	-0.194	0.761	0.581	
	Sense of belonging to the destination	200	4.245	-0.759	-0.501			
	Sense of empathy with the destination	200	4.24	-0.884	0.186			
Narratives	Narratives of previous tourists	200	3.945	-0.261	0.355	0.86	0.651	
	Image of the destination in the media	200	3.85	-0.126	-0.219			
	Diplomatic relations of origin and destination	200	3.94	-0.541	0.912			

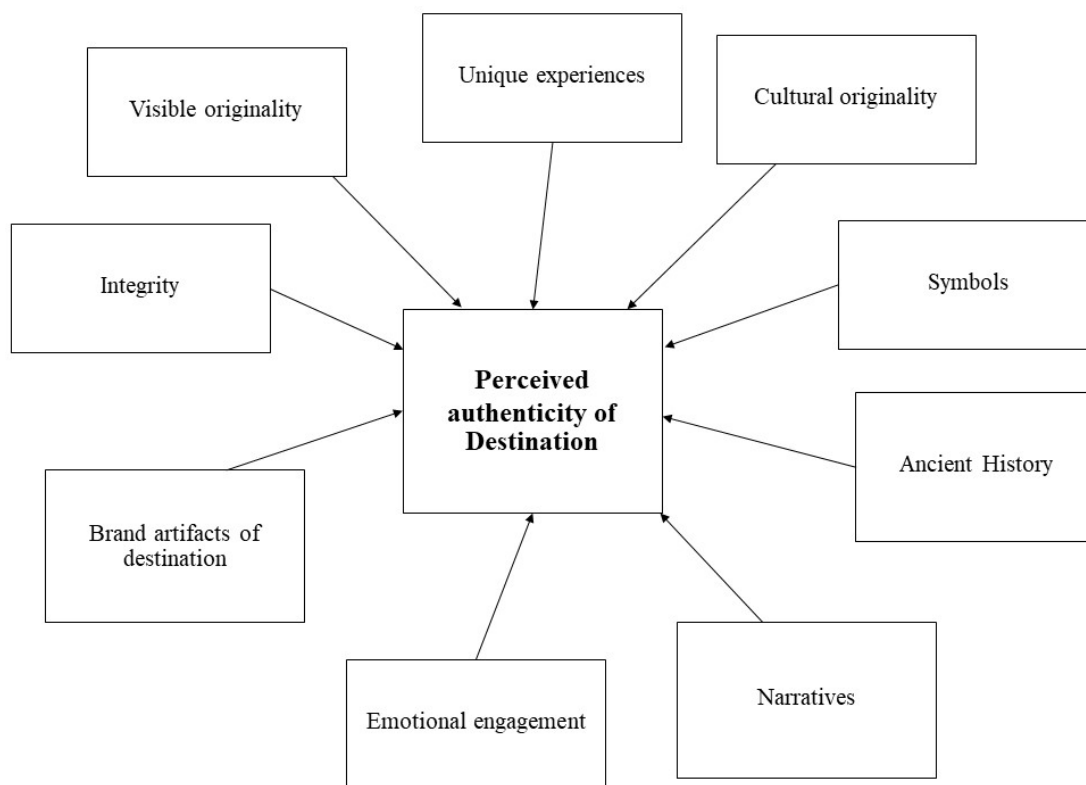


Fig. 2. Conceptual model. Source: Authors.

7. H7: Brand artifacts play a role in how the tourist perceives the authenticity of the destination.
8. H8: The tourist’s emotional engagement with the destination affects the tourist’s perceived authenticity of the destination.
9. H9: Narratives play an effective role in the tourist’s perceived authenticity of the destination.

• **Quantitative findings**

After achieving the initial conceptual model, bilingual questionnaires were designed to examine qualitative findings. Descriptive statistics were calculated using PSPP and JASP software, resulting in the values of Table 2. According to the values in Tables 2, the skewness and kurtosis coefficients in all sub-themes are between 1 and -1, which is favorable. Also, Cronbach’s alpha for the main themes is above 0.7 (Table 3), which indicates the model’s internal consistency. Convergent validity values for all main variables are above 0.5, which is a sign of the proposed model’s validity. On the other hand, analyzing the indicators separately between Chinese and German nationals, which can be seen in detail with their significance levels (t-test) in Table 3, shows that Chinese and German nationals perceive the authenticity of destinations differently based on their cultural background. For example, the perceived authenticity for German nationals appears to be more closely related to visible

originality, Integrity, ancient history, and emotional engagement with the destination, respectively, while for Chinese nationals, unique experience, brand artifacts of the destination, and symbols have a greater impact on their perceived authenticity. At the same time, narratives have almost the same effect on the perceived authenticity of the destination for both nationalities.

**Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore the indicators of the tourists’ perceived authenticity of the destination, using a mixed-method approach by interviewing tourism experts and distributing questionnaires among the sample population. Based on the findings of the qualitative part of the research, 9 main themes of visible originality, unique experience, cultural originality, ancient history, Integrity, symbols, destination’s brand artifacts, emotional engagement, and narratives were found according to 28 sub-themes (codes), which supposedly impact tourists perceived authenticity of destination. By examining the repetition of themes, visible originality has the highest frequency, followed by Integrity, cultural originality, unique experience, and brand artifacts of destinations. The quantitative findings also showed that the perceived authenticity of destinations differs among tourists based on their cultural backgrounds. These findings were

Table 3. The average scores for variables (t-test) (\* Negative t values mean that German nationals have higher average scores than Chinese nationals for the relevant categories). Source: Authors.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Number	Chinese	German	T-Value	Cronbach's alpha $\alpha$
Perceived authenticity of destination	Visible originality	100	4.04	4.15	-0.79*	0.78
	Unique experience	100	4.54	4.44	1.16	
	Cultural originality	100	4.14	4.22	-0.57*	
	Ancient history	100	4.03	4.08	-0.4*	
	Integrity	100	4.13	4.27	-0.67*	
	Symbols	100	4.12	4.06	0.58	
	Brand artifacts of destination	100	4.05	3.91	1.08	
	Emotional engagement	100	4.06	4.08	-0.63*	
	Narratives	100	4.16	4.15	0.1	

consistent with Sang's research (Sang, 2020), which shows that tourists' experiences of authenticity differ according to their cultural background. According to the quantitative findings of the current research, German nationals perceive authenticity as connected with visible originality, Integrity, ancient history, and emotional engagement with the destination, while for Chinese nationals, authenticity is closely affiliated with unique experience, destination's brand artifacts, and symbols, not necessarily historical antiquity, and Integrity of the destination. However, according to the results, external factors such as the narratives of previous tourists, the media image of the destination, and the diplomatic relations between the origin and the destination have an almost equal effect on the perceived authenticity of the destination for both Chinese and German nationalities. The results of this research can help tour operators who are active in the tourism market of China and Germany,

as well as tourism decision-makers, to improve the tour packages and marketing strategies of the destination according to the authenticity indicators perceived by tourists. It is suggested that this research be undertaken for other nationalities, with a random sample population to increase the generalizability of the findings as much as possible.

### Limitations of the Research

One limitation of the research was the non-homogeneousness of the samples tested from the point of view of socio-economic conditions. Other limitations include the inherent limitations of the questionnaire and the limitations resulting from geographical distance.

### Declaration of no conflict of interest

The authors declare that they had no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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