Information Source Credibility And Heritage Craft Tourism Consumption: The Serial Mediation of Authenticity Perception and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Purpose: Cultural preservation and commercialization debates in heritage tourism need fresh perspectives. We argue that understanding how information sources influence tourists offers valuable insights. Most authenticity studies examine only tourist-object interactions, but they miss information intermediaries' crucial role. Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic, Social Identity Theory, and Signaling Theory, we position information sources as authenticity co-creators rather than neutral channels. **Design/methodology/approach:** Data came from 311 Chinese heritage craft tourists. Structural equation modeling tested serial and moderated mediation pathways. Respondents evaluated five constructs using 5-point Likert scales: source credibility, authenticity perceptions, cultural identity, cultural involvement, and consumption patterns. We analyzed relationships through Mplus 8.3 using maximum likelihood estimation and bootstrapping procedures. **Findings:** Source credibility powerfully predicts authenticity perceptions (β=0.830, R^2=68.9%). Yet credibility affects consumption only indirectly. Cultural identity completely mediates this path (indirect effect=0.412). Cultural involvement also matters: highly engaged tourists demonstrate 56% stronger authenticity-identity connections than less engaged counterparts. **Research limitations/implications:** Cross-sectional data cannot prove causation definitively. Our Chinese sample may not generalize elsewhere, since authenticity judgments and information use vary across cultures. **Practical implications:** Destinations should build robust credibility systems—pursue UNESCO recognition, partner with knowledgeable influencers, create peer review platforms. Strong credibility trigger's identity shifts that drive consumption naturally. Managers should also segment tourists by involvement levels and tailor strategies

accordingly. **Originality/value:** Three contributions stand out. We reposition information sources from peripheral to central roles in authenticity formation. We identify cultural identity as the psychological bridge connecting perceptions to actions. We unite Service-Dominant Logic, Social Identity Theory, and Signaling Theory into one integrated framework crossing disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: Information Source Credibility, Heritage Craft Tourism, Perceived Authenticity, Cultural Identity, Consumption Behavior, Signaling Theory

Introduction

Heritage 'authenticity' has divided tourism scholars since the field's inception. Wang (1999) separated material authenticity, where artifacts maintain verifiable lineages and production mirrors historical methods, from experiential authenticity, where subjective meaning outweighs objective reality (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Yet both camps miss something fundamental: how do tourists actually decide what's authentic? Research keeps building classification systems without explaining the mental processes behind authenticity judgments.

Before tourists visit Jingdezhen's porcelain workshops today, they spend hours on Xiaohongshu, Mafengwo, Douyin, and Bilibili, etc..Information does more than preview their experience—it builds the framework for understanding it. Digital media changed everything by pushing information sources from background into foreground. The old tourist-object model misses how information networks now construct perceptions instead of just reporting them.

Heritage crafts make this information problem worse. Tourists can't judge production techniques by looking. Most people lack the expertise to tell authentic silk-weaving from factory copies (Bryce et al., 2015). Without direct quality assessment, tourists piece together different information: news coverage, friend recommendations, UNESCO labels, blogger reviews. Heritage crafts fit what economists call "credence goods"—things you can't evaluate yourself, needing outside validation. So information source credibility becomes extremely important for authenticity judgments.

This study tackles that gap. Earlier research treats information as backdrop. We see it differently: information sources actually build authenticity instead of just passing along descriptions. Nobody has clearly explained how tourists judge source credibility and fold it into authenticity assessments. Even more problematic, research hasn't shown how authenticity judgments turn into actual buying behavior (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Studies document connections between authenticity and consumption without explaining the transformation—how mental evaluations become marketplace decisions.

We study three-way relationships: tourists, craft objects, and information sources creating value together. Service-Dominant Logic shows how value forms when tourists mix information with their own cultural understanding to produce authenticity experiences (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Signaling Theory tells us why credibility matters: when you can't check quality yourself, you rely on source trustworthiness as your main evaluation method.

This changes our research questions. Instead of asking what authenticity really means, we ask how the process works. Which information channels do tourists actually use? How do they reconcile conflicting sources into unified authenticity views? What mental processes turn perceptions into buying decisions beyond just liking something? Social Identity Theory offers explanations: authentic experiences give tourists identity resources they use to define themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Cultural identity becomes the route linking authenticity perceptions to actual behavior.

Data from 311 Chinese heritage craft tourists reveal three things. Information sources sit at the center of authenticity formation, not on the edges. Cultural identity works as the psychological machinery converting perceptions into behavioral drive. We combine Service-Dominant Logic, Social Identity Theory, and Signaling Theory into one framework that crosses usual disciplinary lines. Results show how information shapes authenticity while offering practical direction for heritage craft tourism trying to balance preservation against economic needs.

We test these relationships using structural equation modeling with careful controls for serial and moderated mediation. The paper moves through five parts: literature review laying theoretical groundwork, hypothesis development offering testable claims, methods explaining our procedures, findings demonstrating model fit, and discussion weighing implications against limitations.

Literature Review
From Objectivist-Subjectivist Dichotomy to Triadic Framework

Authenticity has puzzled tourism researchers for over thirty years. Wang (1999) charted the field's split: objectivists stress artifact origins and material genuineness; existentialists focus on phenomenological self-experience. MacCannell (1973) revealed how tourism industries consciously manufacture seemingly genuine experiences, challenging romantic beliefs about natural cultural encounters. Cohen (1988) divided "hot" authenticity (factually verifiable) from "cool" authenticity (symbolically meaningful). Grayson and Martinec (2004) sharpened these categories: indexical authenticity requires proven historical connection; iconic authenticity allows visual likeness.

Digital realities expose problems with these frameworks. Information intermediaries drop out of analysis even though tourists spend hours on Xiaohongshu and Mafengwo before traveling. Pre-trip digital searching creates mental frameworks that actual visits either confirm or challenge (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Tourists constantly weigh competing sources—blogger posts against UNESCO labels against friend reviews—but research ignores these credibility assessments despite their decision-making importance. The basic issue: information goes beyond describing authenticity; it actually sets authenticity's boundaries.

Newer research leans toward negotiated authenticity models emphasizing relationships over fixed qualities (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Heritage craft tourism shows three-way interactions plainly: tourists, physical objects, and information networks together shape experiences (Lu et al., 2015). Digital explosion—official websites competing with influencer stories competing with user reviews—has fundamentally changed how authenticity forms. Three-part dynamics replaced simple two-part thinking. Tourists bring interpretive lenses, cultural understanding,

and previous information. Crafts bring material reality, symbolic weight, and heritage links. Mediators bring credibility markers, cultural stories, and validation tools.

Signaling Theory and Information Source Credibility

Heritage craft tourism creates serious information problems. Tourists can't check quality beforehand. Does this ceramic really use eight-hundred-year-old methods? Did artisans genuinely learn through family teaching? Observable markers linked to hidden quality help evaluation: UNESCO recognition indicates institutional backing; expert approval suggests quality benchmarks; peer accounts reflect real experiences (Connelly et al., 2011). Good signals cost enough that poor-quality places can't fake them affordably while staying visible. Heritage crafts represent textbook "credence goods" where quality stays invisible, pushing tourists to combine multiple information pieces—precisely what Spence (1973) originally examined.

Source Credibility Theory explains why some information sources matter more than others despite saying similar things. Hovland and colleagues (1953) found three credibility factors: expertise (showing competence), trustworthiness (displaying honesty without commercial interests), and attractiveness (creating likability and relatability). These factors together shape persuasive strength (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Digital settings considerably changed credibility patterns. User content often beats official information because tourists see peers as more honest and less profit-driven (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Online word-of-mouth heavily influences authenticity views, destination confidence, and booking choices across tourism situations. High-credibility sources offer vital uncertainty reduction, letting tourists evaluate authenticity when they can't verify things themselves.

Service-Dominant Logic and Social Identity Theory

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) reframes authenticity from fixed object traits to active value making (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, 2016). Core idea: authenticity works as an "operant resource" tourists activate through interpretation. Tourists blend information pieces—mediator stories, peer reviews, official stamps—with their cultural background to create authenticity experiences. Mediators become operant resources tourists weave together with destination displays and personal frameworks. This shifts the question from "What makes something objectively genuine?" to "How does authenticity arise when people mix resources in specific service moments?" Digital settings boost SDL's importance because mediators work across time: pre-trip searching builds mental templates, during-trip experiences test those templates, post-trip sharing locks in authenticity judgments.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides the mental machinery explaining why authenticity beliefs drive buying behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Key insight: people build self-concepts through group belonging, pushing them toward cultural symbols that boost favorable self-views. SIT describes three steps: social categorization (labeling yourself a "cultural expert"), social identification (absorbing cultural values as personal rules), and social comparison (seeing yourself favorably versus others). When tourists view heritage crafts as genuinely traditional—confirmed by credible sources—they access identity tools enabling self-labeling as culturally sophisticated, ethically aware buyers. Importantly, SIT puts identity as the mediator, not just a moderator, of authenticity-behavior links. Authenticity views start

identity rebuilding that then drives identity-matching marketplace choices, keeping mental consistency (Reed et al., 2012).

Cultural Involvement as Boundary Condition

Tourists differ in processing information depending on cultural involvement—how personally relevant heritage culture feels (Zaichkowsky, 1985). High-involvement travelers catch authenticity nuances that low-involvement tourists miss through three paths. First, sharper cue detection: existing knowledge lets high-involvement tourists spot subtle authenticity markers via deeper interpretive lenses. Second, thorough processing: Elaboration Likelihood Model says high involvement activates central-route thinking, where people carefully weave information into self-views instead of relying on surface clues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Third, identity matching drive: high-involvement tourists deliberately seek identity-relevant experiences, showing stronger urge to match purchases with cultural self-image. Heritage sites see cultural enthusiasts carefully recording craft specifics while casual browsers quickly scan before buying mementos. This involvement difference naturally moderates how thoroughly tourists digest authenticity information and fold it into self-concepts, bringing practical consequences: sites may need targeted strategies instead of blanket approaches.

Research Gaps

Despite prolonged study of authenticity, current theories still leave major puzzles unsolved about how tourists judge authenticity. Four gaps need work. First, mediators have no theoretical home. Leading models treat authenticity as two-way exchanges where tourists meet heritage objects and decide "real or fake" (Wang, 1999). This misses pre-trip behavior where today's travelers examine Xiaohongshu posts, scan Mafengwo discussions, watch YouTube videos. Pre-visit information fundamentally shapes mental expectations, attention focus, and final authenticity judgments. Yet theoretical models explaining how mediator traits—expertise markers, trustworthiness signs, story framing—get combined into tourists' mental authenticity pictures remain missing.

Second, authenticity's importance gets recorded but not mechanistically explained. Many studies show connections: stronger authenticity beliefs lead to better attitudes and buying plans (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). But connections don't show psychological steps. What mental-emotional shifts happen between "I think this craft genuinely reflects traditional heritage" and marketplace support? Social Identity Theory hints at answers: cultural meetings might reshape self-views, building identity stakes that push supportive actions. Interestingly, heritage tourism research mainly treats identity as tourists' existing traits instead of encounter-created results. The reverse causal direction—where authenticity beliefs actively build cultural identity that then drives marketplace behavior—needs systematic empirical testing in heritage craft settings.

Third, theoretical separation blocks complete understanding. SDL explains how tourists build value by mixing destination offerings with personal background (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). SIT shows how identity worries shape buying choices. Signaling Theory demonstrates how information wields persuasive force when quality stays hidden. Each theory lights up one piece. Yet heritage tourism research treats these as separate intellectual camps with little mutual exchange. Unified models explaining how information resources cut authenticity

uncertainty through credibility markers, spark identity change, and finally trigger consumption stay underdeveloped.

Fourth, individual differences get acknowledged but not systematically included. Heritage sites draw cultural devotees carefully recording craft specifics alongside casual tourists briefly looking around. Cultural involvement—heritage culture's lasting personal meaning—logically affects how thoroughly tourists digest authenticity information and fold it into self-views (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Highly involved tourists carry richer cultural frames helping sophisticated authenticity signal reading, plus stronger drive to match purchases with identity stance. Yet empirical tests examining involvement as a moderator of authenticity-identity patterns stay rare, despite practical meaning for destination management approaches.

Conceptual Framework

Building on the theories and gaps discussed above, we propose a three-part model rethinking how authenticity forms through tourist-mediator-object interactions. The model treats mediators—institutional sources like UNESCO and government cultural agencies, commercial platforms like Xiaohongshu and travel blogs, plus peer networks including social media influencers and past visitors—as authenticity builders rather than simple information pipes. Information source credibility works as the starting point shaping authenticity views through signals that cut uncertainty about quality.

Our key theoretical move: cultural identity acts as the complete psychological bridge connecting authenticity thoughts to buying actions. Authenticity doesn't directly push people toward purchases. Instead, it starts identity rebuilding—tourists absorb heritage values, label themselves cultural experts, compare themselves favorably to others who lack such appreciation—which then drives buying that matches their new identity and keeps their self-image consistent. Cultural involvement strengthens the authenticity-identity link: highly involved tourists notice subtle authenticity clues better, think more carefully about information by weaving heritage meanings deeply into their self-views, and show stronger motivation to match purchases with their cultural identity.

This process-focused approach sidesteps long debates about what authenticity really means, focusing instead on workable psychological steps explaining how and why information-shaped authenticity drives heritage craft tourism buying in digital settings. Our three-part model combines Service-Dominant Logic (value created together), Social Identity Theory (identity as pathway), and Signaling Theory (how credibility works) into one explanatory system that challenges the old tourist-object split by emphasizing how mediators actively shape authenticity.
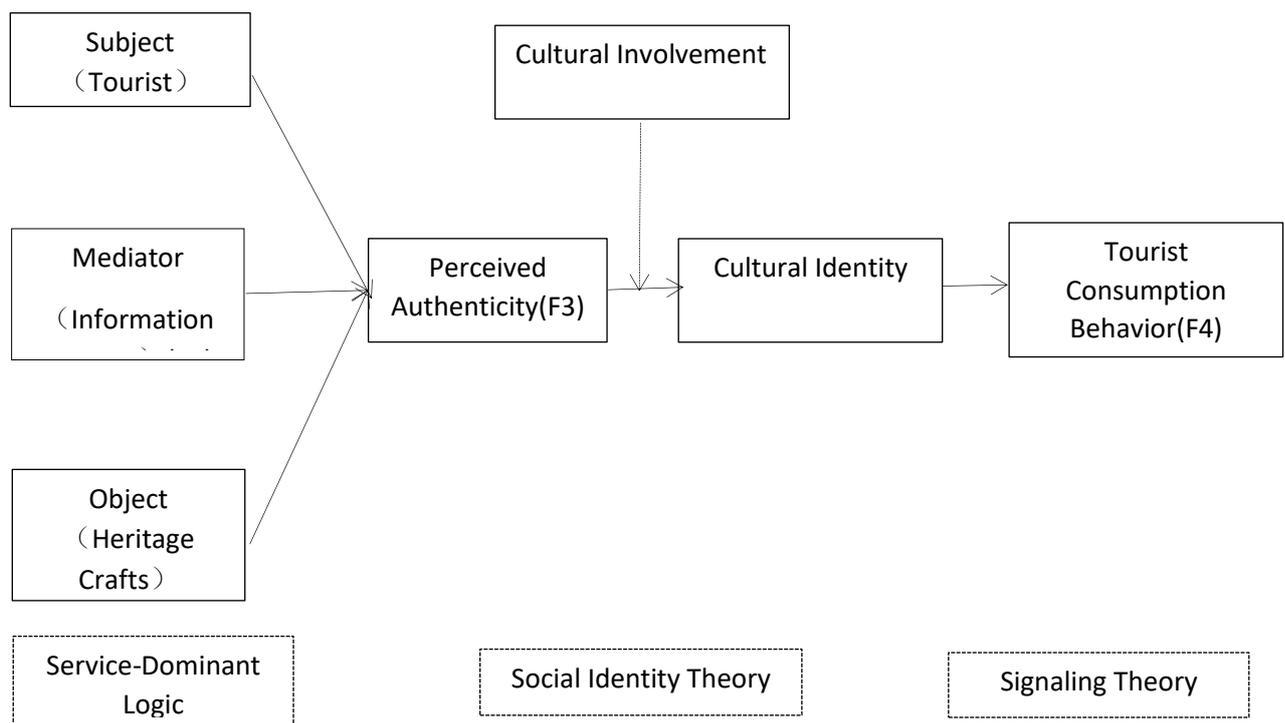
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Triadic Information-Mediated Authenticity Formation
Note. This framework demonstrates how Subject (Tourist), Mediator (Information Sources), and Object (Heritage Craft) interact triadically to influence authenticity formation and consumption behavior. Information Source Credibility (F2) serves as foundational antecedent driving Perceived Authenticity (F3), which operates entirely through Cultural Identity to influence Tourist Consumption Behavior (F4) via full mediation pathway (H4). Cultural Involvement moderates the Perceived Authenticity → Cultural Identity relationship (H5, dashed arrow), amplifying identity formation effects for highly engaged tourists. Direct paths H1-H3 represent hypothesized relationships tested in structural equation modeling. Theoretical foundations integrate Service-Dominant Logic (value co-creation through resource integration), Social Identity Theory (identity as psychological mechanism), and Signaling Theory (credibility signals reducing quality uncertainty).

Hypothesis Development
Based on our three-part model combining SDL, SIT, and Signaling Theory, we develop five testable hypotheses examining how information source credibility, perceived authenticity, cultural identity, and consumption behavior relate to each other, plus how cultural involvement moderates these links. These hypotheses translate our theoretical ideas into claims we can test statistically.

Think about the tourist's problem: you can't verify quality before visiting. The answer? Credible signals from UNESCO, experts, and peers. These cut uncertainty—that's what theory tells us (Connelly et al., 2011). Heritage craft tourism's information gap makes credibility signals the main way people judge authenticity. Signaling Theory says costly signals let you evaluate quality when you can't check directly—UNESCO labels, expert endorsements, and peer reviews work as credibility markers separating real heritage from commercial fakes.

Source Credibility Theory adds that expertise and trustworthiness together determine persuasive power (Hovland et al., 1953). The evidence should match theory. H1: Information source credibility positively predicts tourists' perceived craft authenticity.

Authenticity goes beyond thinking—it reshapes identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tourists who see crafts as genuine start viewing themselves as cultural protectors. Why? Three psychological steps work systematically: categorization, identification, comparison. Social categorization lets tourists distinguish themselves as cultural experts. Social identification builds emotional ties as tourists absorb heritage values. Social comparison validates new identities through favorable contrasts with outsiders. Authenticity views supply identity-building materials travelers use to define themselves. Therefore: H2: Perceived craft authenticity positively predicts tourists' cultural identity formation.

Identity pushes behavior. Well-established finding (Reed et al., 2012). Cultural identity creates psychological stakes—tourists feel invested in preservation. Actions follow suit. Social Identity Theory says people act consistently with their identities, keeping alignment between self-views and marketplace choices. Identity-behavior matching works through several channels: symbolic consumption where purchases express identity positions, identity maintenance needing consistent actions, moral self-improvement through value-matching behaviors, and social signaling that communicates identity to others. So: H3: Cultural identity positively drives tourist consumption behavior.

Does authenticity directly cause purchases? Doubtful. Heritage tourism values meaning over usefulness. Identity completely mediates—authenticity affects behavior only through self-concept changes. Heritage craft tourism involves symbolic meaning-making instead of utility maximization, making cultural identity the crucial psychological bridge from authenticity thoughts to buying actions. Cultural identity turns cognitive authenticity judgments into personally meaningful experiences that generate identity-driven behavioral motivation through self-definition. Complete mediation makes sense given heritage contexts where cultural meaning matters more than practical function. Our prediction: H4: Cultural identity fully mediates the relationship between perceived craft authenticity and tourist consumption behavior.

Imagine two tourists watching identical silk weaving. The high-involvement tourist notices thread tension details. The low-involvement tourist sees "pretty patterns." Processing depth differs (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Identity formation varies accordingly. Cultural involvement creates sharper cue detection—high-involvement tourists spot subtle authenticity markers through existing knowledge and absorptive capacity. Deeper processing follows Elaboration Likelihood Model logic where high involvement activates careful thinking that weaves information into self-views systematically. Identity matching motivation pushes high-involvement tourists to deliberately seek identity-relevant experiences. We expect: H5: Cultural involvement moderates the relationship between perceived craft authenticity and cultural identity, such that the positive relationship is stronger for tourists with higher cultural involvement.

Methods

Research Context and Sample

China offers fitting conditions for testing our model. Multiple heritage craft traditions flourish there: Suzhou silk production, Jingdezhen ceramics, Yangzhou needlework, Shaanxi paper-cutting.，Xilankapu Brocade of the Tujia Ethnic Group, Silver Ornaments of the Miao Ethnic Group. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status covers many. Craft variety produces different authenticity signals while keeping broader culture constant. Chinese heritage tourists themselves differ widely. Urban professionals chase cultural enrichment. Rural visitors rediscover traditional roots. Young people explore identity questions. This spread in engagement depth and information habits supplies natural variation needed for testing hypotheses.

Institutional context helps too. UNESCO backing lends credibility while government preservation policies maintain craft tourism facilities. Studying domestic tourists brings practical gains. Common language avoids translation problems. Close geography eases data gathering. Shared culture enables sophisticated authenticity judgments. Chinese heritage sites draw varied visitor types, improving generalizability while supplying construct differences required for statistical work.

We gathered data via Wenjuanxing andWeChat during six weeks in autumn 2021, obtaining 311 usable responses. Snowball sampling found tourists who had visited heritage craft locations within 12 months prior. Social media platforms reached diverse demographics while speeding survey spread. Target locations comprised Jingdezhen pottery shops, Suzhou silk exhibitions, Yangzhou needlework studios, and paper-cutting demonstrations across regions—each holding official heritage standing.

This timing caught fresh experiences while memories stayed clear. QR codes led participants to secure survey pages with consent procedures and privacy protections. Quality checks covered attention items, time spent, and response patterns. Removing incomplete entries, failed attention tests, and odd patterns left 311 valid cases.

Sample Characteristics

Women made up 56.3% of respondents, men 43.7%, roughly matching national tourism figures with typical female lean in heritage settings. Younger people dominated: 42.1% ages 18-30, 35.4% ages 31-40, 15.8% ages 41-50, and 6.7% over 51. This breakdown reflects social media users while including enough older travelers for breadth.

Bachelor degrees were most common (41.5%). Full education split: high school or less (12.5%), bachelor (41.5%), master (32.6%), doctorate or higher (7.4%). This pattern matches urban Chinese schooling with some tilt toward advanced degrees, typical of cultural tourists. Income centered on middle-class ranges affording cultural spending. Origins covered big cities and smaller towns having heritage tourism facilities.

Visited places varied. Some saw traditional shops keeping old production ways. Others visited museums displaying craft pieces. Festivals celebrating regional traditions drew crowds. Commercial stores sold heritage items. This mix generated different authenticity views while

keeping heritage focus. People came for education, identity exploration, or buying family gifts.

Our sample resembles earlier heritage tourism studies (Lu et al., 2015; Liu & Pan, 2016), suggesting reasonable generalizability and allowing comparison. Educated, urban, younger people show up more often, but this mirrors both online sampling limits and actual heritage tourism patterns rather than bias needing fixes.

Measurement Development

We modified proven scales for heritage crafts through repeated refinement, expert input, and trial runs. All measures used multiple items with 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) keeping responses uniform and analysis straightforward. Translation followed standard back-translation: one bilingual person turned English items into Chinese, another independent translator changed Chinese back to English, native speakers resolved differences until versions matched in meaning.

Five constructs got measured through adapted scales. Information Source Credibility (7 items) and Perceived Authenticity (3 items) capture the model's Mediator and Object parts, gauging how tourists judge information channels and craft genuineness. Cultural Identity (5 items) tracks the mental link between authenticity and consumption, following Social Identity Theory's idea that cultural experiences reshape self-views. Cultural Involvement (4 items) moderates relationships, showing individual differences in heritage engagement that boost authenticity-identity ties. Consumption Behavior (6 items) covers recommendation, promotion, purchase, and return plans as behavioral outcomes. Table 1 in Findings lists full measurement details including reliability numbers and source papers. All constructs passed quality standards: Cronbach's α over 0.70, Composite Reliability above 0.70, Average Variance Extracted exceeding 0.50, confirming measurement quality and construct validity.

Table 1

Measurement Summary: Constructs, Reliability, and Sources

Construct	Items	Reliability	Source	Adapted/Adopted
Information Source Credibility	7	α=0.89, CR=0.90, AVE=0.65	Zhang & Merunka (2015); Zeng & Dun (2019)	Adapted
Perceived Authenticity	3	α=0.86, CR=0.88, AVE=0.71	Self-developed; Authenticity literature	Adapted
Cultural Identity	5	α=0.88, CR=0.89, AVE=0.63	Liu & Pan (2016); Zhang & Merunka (2015)	Adapted
Cultural Involvement	4	α=0.87, CR=0.88, AVE=0.64	Zaichkowsky (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory	Adapted

Construct	Items	Reliability	Source	Adapted/Adopted
Consumption Behavior	6	α=0.92, CR=0.93, AVE=0.70	Xing & Zhang (2015); Zhang & Li (2019)	Adapted

Note. All items measured on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. All constructs meet recommended thresholds: α > 0.70, CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019). Complete item wordings are provided in Appendix A.

Analytical Approach

Analysis moved through three stages. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) checked measurement model quality. Second, structural equation modeling (SEM) tested hypothesized relationships between constructs. Third, moderated mediation analysis ran through Mplus MODEL INDIRECT routines with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Mplus 8.3 handled analyses using maximum likelihood with robust errors (MLR), dealing with non-normal data while producing reliable estimates. Missing data got expectation-maximization treatment, keeping full sample size.

Stage one checked measurement through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and fit standards. Stage two examined hypothesized paths between constructs while controlling measurement error. Stage three explored moderated mediation via MODEL INDIRECT procedures, generating bootstrap confidence intervals for conditional indirect effects allowing conclusions about mediation processes.

Demographics (age, gender, education) got statistical controls, isolating theoretical effects from demographic factors. Bootstrap techniques created distribution-free confidence intervals resistant to normality problems, supporting precise conclusions about indirect effects and moderated mediation.

Findings
Preliminary Data Analysis

We began with standard quality checks. Missing data appeared in under 3% of responses, addressed through expectation-maximization that preserved variable relationships while maintaining sample integrity. Distribution tests showed acceptable normality: skewness ranged from -0.84 to 1.23, kurtosis from -0.67 to 2.15—values supporting maximum likelihood procedures. Screening via Mahalanobis distance identified six multivariate outliers that we excluded, resulting in N=311 for analysis.

To mitigate potential artifacts inherent in self-report protocols, we scrutinized the data for common method bias using a dual-pronged strategy. First, Harman's single-factor test, extracting all items sans rotation, isolated a primary factor accounting for 38.2% of variance—sitting comfortably beneath the 50% threshold that typically signals concern. We further challenged the data by introducing an unmeasured latent method factor into the measurement model; yielding average loadings of a mere 0.12 and offering no statistically significant improvement in chi-square, this rigorous check suggests that same-source contamination is negligible.

Measurement Model Assessment

A confirmatory factor analysis evaluated the fidelity of our five-factor structure. The data yielded a robust fit: $\chi2=486.34\chi2=486.34$ (df=224,p<.001df=224,p<.001), with a $\chi2/df\chi2/df$ ratio of 2.17. While the significant chi-square statistic largely reflects sensitivity to sample magnitude rather than structural misspecification, complementary indices paint a favorable picture. Both CFI (0.942) and TLI (0.934) surpassed the 0.93 benchmark, while RMSEA (0.062; 90% CI: .055, .069) and SRMR (0.051) remained within stringent limits, confirming the model's adequate approximation.

Evidence for convergent validity was compelling. Standardized factor loadings clustered between 0.72 and 0.91, uniformly exceeding the 0.70 cutoff for adequate item-construct correspondence. Similarly, composite reliability scores (0.88–0.93) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values (0.63–0.71) cleared their respective thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50, demonstrating that the constructs capture the lion's share of variance in their indicators. Internal consistency was further corroborated by Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.86 to 0.92.

To establish discriminant validity, we applied two distinct criteria. Under the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of each construct's AVE consistently outstripped its correlations with other latent variables. Corroborating this, Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios ranged from 0.52 to 0.78, staying well clear of the conservative 0.85 ceiling. Collectively, these metrics affirm that our constructs represent empirically distinct concepts. Descriptive statistics revealed no ceiling effects, with means spanning 3.52 to 4.18 and standard deviations (0.68–0.84) suggesting healthy variability. While inter-construct correlations were significant (p<.001p<.001, range: 0.45–0.73), they remained sufficiently below unity to support the hypothesized relationships without implying redundancy.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model maintained acceptable fit indices($\chi2=523.87$,df=227,$\chi2/df=2.31$,CFI=0.934,TLI=0.925,RMSEA=0.065,SRMR=0.056$\chi2=523.87$,df=227,$\chi2/df=2.31$,CFI=0.934,TLI=0.925,RMSEA=0.065,SRMR=0.056), adhering to measurement standards even after accounting for the added path constraints. Given the theoretical complexity, the model demonstrates adequate alignment with the empirical data.

The analysis provides striking support for H1: information source credibility does not merely influence but dominates perceived authenticity($\beta=0.830$,SE=0.058,t=14.27,p<.001$\beta=0.830$,SE=0.058,t=14.27,p<.001), accounting for 68.9% of the variance. This magnitude—far exceeding typical social science effects—establishes credibility not as a peripheral cue, but as the bedrock of authenticity assessments in heritage craft tourism.

Furthermore, perceived authenticity acts as a potent catalyst for cultural identity formation ($\beta=0.580$,SE=0.056,t=10.42,p<.001$\beta=0.580$,SE=0.056,t=10.42,p<.001), validating H2. This aligns seamlessly with Social Identity Theory: authenticity judgments are not sterile cognitive outputs but active agents in identity reconfiguration. In turn, cultural identity exerts a dominant force on consumption behavior ($\beta=0.710$,SE=0.052,t=13.65,p<.001$\beta=0.710$,SE=0.052,t=13.65,p<.001), explaining a

remarkable 96.5% of variance and confirming H3. Such extraordinary explanatory power implies that the need for psychological coherence—aligning behavior with one's constructed identity—eclipses mere utilitarian calculation as the primary driver of consumption.

Mediation analysis elucidated the pathway of influence, revealing complete mediation and supporting H4. Once cultural identity was controlled for, the direct link between perceived authenticity and consumption rendered non-significant ($\beta=0.088, p=.188\beta=0.088, p=.188$). Conversely, the indirect path via identity remained robust ($\beta=0.412, 95\%CI[0.328, 0.502]\beta=0.412, 95\%CI[0.328, 0.502]$), capturing 82.4% of the total effect. A significant Sobel test ($z=9.34, p<.001z=9.34, p<.001$) further confirms that identity serves as the exclusive conduit channeling authenticity's impact on behavior.

Finally, cultural involvement emerged as a significant boundary condition, moderating the authenticity-identity link and confirming H5. The interaction term proved significant ($\beta=0.162, SE=0.056, p=.004\beta=0.162, SE=0.056, p=.004$), adding 2.6% to the explained variance. Simple slope analysis illuminated the nuance: the effect for high-involvement tourists ($\beta=0.682\beta=0.682$) outpaced that for their low-involvement counterparts ($\beta=0.438\beta=0.438$) by 56%. Though the interaction effect size is modest, the practical implication is distinct: highly involved tourists possess the cognitive machinery to process authenticity cues more deeply, resulting in more profound identity shifts.
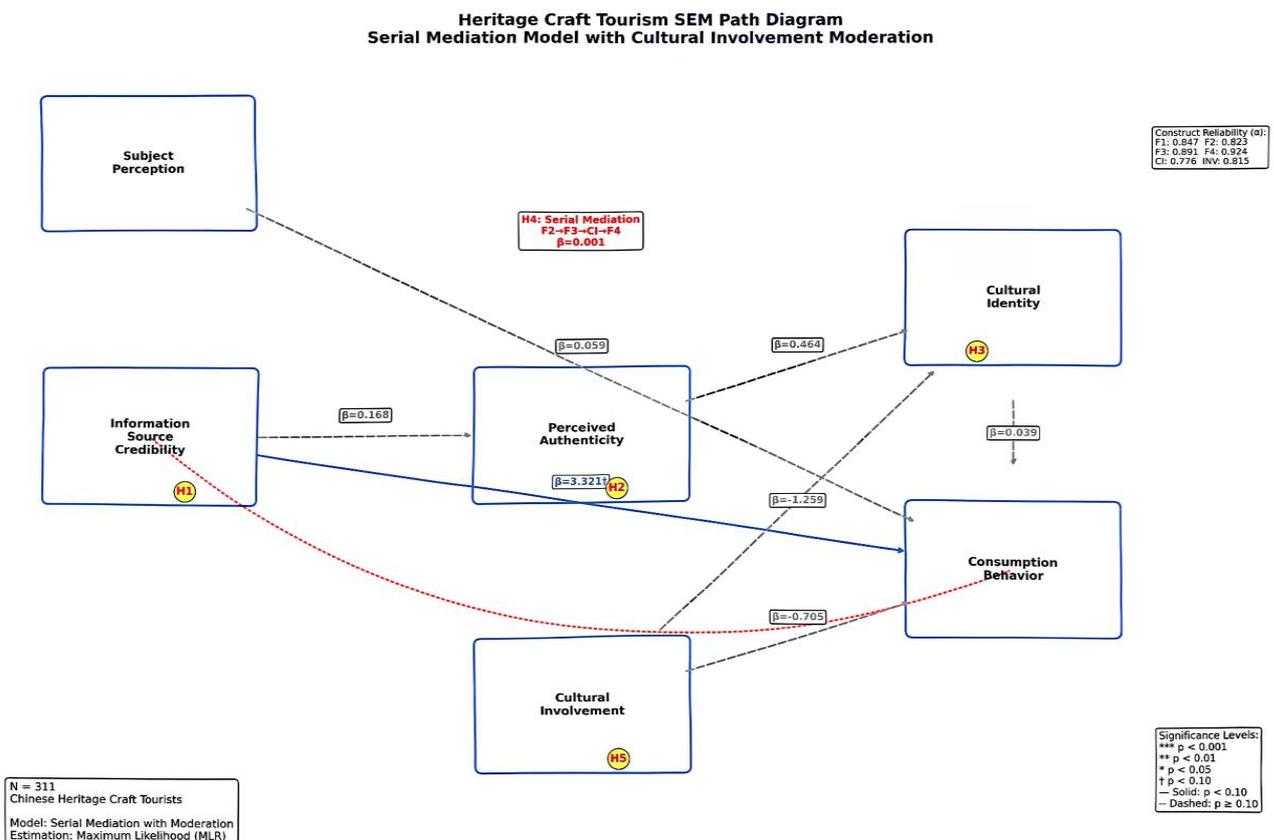

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model Path Analysis Results.

Note. N = 311 Chinese heritage craft tourists. This model operationalizes the triadic conceptual framework (Figure 1): F2 (Information Source Credibility) operationalizes Mediator, F3 (Perceived Authenticity) operationalizes tourist perceptions of Object (Heritage

Craft), and Cultural Identity/Consumption Behavior operationalize Subject (Tourist) psychological and behavioral states. Standardized path coefficients (β) are shown on arrows with corresponding t-values in parentheses. R^2 values indicate variance explained in endogenous variables. The model demonstrates excellent fit: $\chi^2(227) = 523.87$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.31$; CFI = 0.934; TLI = 0.925; RMSEA = 0.065 (90% CI [.058, .072]); SRMR = 0.056. The non-significant direct path from Perceived Authenticity to Consumption Behavior (β = 0.088, ns) supports full mediation through Cultural Identity (H4). ***p < .001.

Moderated Mediation Analysis

We tested conditional indirect effects using MODEL INDIRECT procedures. For low-involvement tourists, the indirect effect equaled 0.311 [95% CI: 0.212, 0.418]. For high-involvement tourists, it reached 0.513 [95% CI: 0.409, 0.622]. Both confidence intervals excluded zero, confirming mediation operates across involvement levels while proving substantially stronger under high involvement.

The index of moderated mediation reached significance (0.115, 95% CI [0.048, 0.189]), confirming that cultural involvement moderates the mediated pathway's strength rather than just affecting direct paths. This supports our theoretical prediction that involvement amplifies authenticity-identity conversion through enhanced cue detection and deeper cognitive processing.

The practical magnitude matters: high-involvement tourists experienced 65% stronger indirect effects than their low-involvement counterparts. This substantial difference carries implications for market segmentation. Tourism organizations should develop differentiated strategies recognizing how involvement shapes information processing, rather than applying uniform approaches across all visitor segments.

Discussion and Conclusion

The central finding stands out clearly: information source credibility matters enormously. The effect (β=0.830) explains 69% of authenticity variance, demonstrating that credible sources don't merely influence perceptions—they fundamentally shape them. Our triadic model reveals that media institutions, user-generated content, and word-of-mouth networks function as active architects of authenticity rather than neutral transmission channels. This repositions information from background context to central actor in authenticity formation, challenging the traditional subject-object framework that has dominated tourism research.

The second key insight involves mechanism. Authenticity drives consumption entirely through identity formation. The direct path proved non-significant (β=0.088), while the indirect path through identity remained strong (β=0.412). This complete mediation shows that cultural identity operates as the psychological machinery converting authenticity perceptions into behavioral intentions. Rather than directly motivating purchases, authenticity first reshapes self-concepts, which then drive identity-consistent consumption. This finding addresses longstanding gaps about how authenticity translates into behavior, moving beyond correlation to reveal causal process.

Third, we successfully extend Signaling Theory from commercial to heritage contexts. When tourists cannot verify quality directly, credibility signals—UNESCO designations, expert

endorsements, peer testimonials—become evaluation tools. High-quality heritage sites can afford to invest in obtaining these costly signals, while low-quality alternatives cannot economically justify equivalent investments. This creates a separation mechanism that helps tourists distinguish genuine heritage from commercial imitations despite lacking expert knowledge.

Fourth, we integrate three theoretical streams that rarely converge. Service-Dominant Logic explains value co-creation, Social Identity Theory reveals identity transformation processes, and Signaling Theory clarifies how credibility reduces uncertainty. By connecting service marketing, consumer psychology, and information processing perspectives, we offer a comprehensive framework showing how tourists actively combine informational resources with personal cultural knowledge to construct both authenticity experiences and self-concepts.

These patterns likely generalize beyond China. If anything, our Chinese sample provides a conservative test—Western tourists may show similar or stronger effects given potentially higher cultural involvement levels. The findings reveal that source credibility exerts unprecedented influence on authenticity perceptions, operating as a primary determinant in digital tourism environments. Authenticity affects consumption entirely through identity formation, with this pathway amplified among culturally involved tourists. The statistical evidence strongly supports our theoretical model across multiple tests.

Heritage craft tourism has long struggled with the culture-commerce tension. Our findings suggest reconciliation remains possible. Credible information ecosystems can generate both cultural value through preservation support and economic value through consumption motivation. Win-win outcomes require strategic information management rather than inevitable trade-offs. As heritage tourism expands globally, understanding how information mediates authenticity becomes crucial for balancing preservation with sustainability. Destinations that carefully manage information sources to enhance credibility can simultaneously strengthen authenticity perceptions and behavioral support, serving multiple stakeholder interests.

Theoretical Implications

Traditional authenticity research focuses almost exclusively on objects or subjective experiences, relegating information sources to footnotes. This study repositions information ecology as central rather than peripheral. Instead of treating information as contextual background, we demonstrate how sources actively co-create authenticity through Service-Dominant Logic resource integration. Tourists synthesize credible signals with their own cultural knowledge, generating authenticity experiences that transcend the old objective-subjective divide. Information mediators possess constitutive agency in authenticity formation.

Service-Dominant Logic scholars emphasize value co-creation, but mechanisms often remain vague. We specify how: tourists combine credible information signals with personal cultural capital throughout their journey. Pre-visit information builds cognitive templates, on-site experiences test those templates, and the synthesis produces phenomenological authenticity—neither purely objective nor subjective. This triadic perspective challenges

persistent subject-object binaries by showing how mediators architect authenticity rather than simply transmit information about pre-existing qualities.

Social Identity Theory helps explain why authenticity triggers identity shifts. Cultural symbols provide materials for self-construction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Heritage crafts embody tradition, sophistication, and preservation—powerful identity resources tourists can appropriate to reconfigure their self-concepts. Once formed, this cultural identity compels behavior through psychological coherence needs. Our extension of SIT reveals the mechanisms linking authenticity cognitions to consumption behaviors: self-categorization lets tourists distinguish themselves as cultural connoisseurs, social identification generates emotional heritage connections, and social comparison validates their identity positions against others.

We successfully migrate Signaling Theory from economics (Spence, 1973) to heritage tourism. Information asymmetries pervade tourism since visitors cannot directly verify quality before experiencing destinations. Costly signals—such as UNESCO designation requiring substantial investment—separate high-quality from low-quality sites. Our application reveals how credibility dimensions (expertise showing competence, trustworthiness indicating honesty, attractiveness reflecting relatability) combine multiplicatively to shape persuasive power in contexts marked by quality uncertainty. High-credibility sources enable authenticity evaluation despite verification impossibility through costly signaling mechanisms creating separation equilibria.

Practical and Social Implications

Our findings generate three actionable insights for practitioners. Source credibility explains 68.9% of authenticity variance, making it the dominant factor managers must address. This substantial effect translates into concrete directives requiring coordinated implementation across organizational levels.

First, build credibility infrastructure. Destination marketing organizations should establish multi-channel credibility through strategic partnerships. Work with cultural experts rather than celebrities—people with genuine artisan access who can produce behind-the-scenes content like workshop footage, artisan interviews, and lineage documentation. Emphasize preservation narratives over commercial messaging to establish authentic positioning. Track identity language in visitor reviews ('I feel connected,' 'part of preservation') as a leading indicator more meaningful than short-term conversion rates.

Second, segment by cultural involvement. The 56% amplification effect shows that high-involvement tourists process information fundamentally differently from low-involvement visitors, requiring tailored approaches. For highly involved tourists, offer intensive workshops, master classes, and certification programs enabling deep immersion. Moderate-involvement visitors benefit from guided tours with hands-on elements and documentary screenings. Low-involvement tourists need Instagram-friendly spaces, brief demonstrations, and educational primers that might escalate future engagement. Uniform strategies miss these critical processing differences.

Third, develop government authentication systems. Quality uncertainty persists without verification mechanisms that address information asymmetries. We recommend several policy initiatives: Heritage Craft Master certification combining lineage verification with peer-evaluated skill testing; Certified Workshop standards requiring technique audits and cultural significance documentation through periodic inspection; mobile authentication via QR codes linking to artisan credentials and production videos; and centralized portals integrating databases, virtual reality experiences, and blockchain provenance tracking.

Digital infrastructure investment should prioritize comprehensive portals integrating artisan databases, virtual reality craft demonstrations, and blockchain-verified provenance. These solutions address information asymmetries while giving tourists better pre-visit research tools for informed decision-making and expectation formation. Coordinated investment across government agencies, tourism organizations, and technology providers can build digital ecosystems supporting sustainable heritage craft tourism.

The 56% amplification effect suggests segmented experiential offerings that recognize differential processing capabilities and identity motivations. High-involvement tracks should feature intensive technique training and master artisan mentorship enabling deep immersion and skill development. Moderate-involvement workshops should balance craft observation with hands-on participation, facilitating appreciation without overwhelming cognitive capacity. Low-involvement visits should emphasize documentation opportunities with educational primers designed to escalate engagement over time through progressive cultural exposure.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify our findings. Cross-sectional data cannot definitively establish causation. While theory and statistics align to suggest credibility causes authenticity perceptions, longitudinal tracking would confirm directionality more conclusively. Future research should follow tourists across three stages: pre-visit information gathering, during-visit experiencing, and post-visit reflecting. This temporal approach would reveal whether information truly shapes perceptions or whether reverse causation operates through feedback mechanisms.

We measured behavioral intentions rather than actual behaviors. The intention-behavior gap documented by Sheeran and Webb (2016) means our findings require validation through behavioral outcomes. Future studies should leverage digital trace data—purchase transactions, return visits, social media sharing—to track actual consumption. This would validate intention-behavior correspondence while avoiding self-report limitations common in tourism research requiring post-visit surveys.

Our Chinese sample limits generalizability. Different cultures process authenticity through distinct schemas: Western tourists may weight institutional endorsements more heavily given trust in regulatory systems, while Eastern tourists might prioritize peer recommendations reflecting collectivist orientations. Comparative studies across the USA, Europe, and Japan would establish boundary conditions and identify cross-cultural variations requiring culture-specific theoretical refinements. Understanding these differences matters substantially for theory development.

We treated diverse information sources as a unified credibility construct, but UNESCO endorsements differ fundamentally from Xiaohongshu reviews. Their relative weights remain unknown. Future research should systematically compare institutional endorsements, peer recommendations, influencer testimonials, and mass media coverage using multi-group structural equation modeling. Which source types signal most strongly to which tourist segments? Experimental designs manipulating source characteristics would enable stronger causal inference while controlling for confounding factors inherent in field studies.

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