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Research Paper

When Authenticity Meets Sustainability: The Role of Environmental Awareness in Shaping Tourist Visiting Behaviour

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the effect of perceived authenticity on environmental awareness and its implications on tourist visit behaviour by considering the role of destination attachment and sustainability motivation. Data were obtained through a survey of respondents who had travel experience, then analysed using a structural model approach. The results showed that perceived authenticity positively and significantly affected environmental awareness. Furthermore, environmental awareness was found to be a major predictor in shaping responsible tourist visit behaviour. The structural model also showed a high R^2 value, confirming that the ecological awareness variable could act as a mediating mechanism that bridged the influence of authenticity on tourist visit behaviour. These findings indicate that integrating cultural authenticity and environmental education is very important in promoting sustainable tourism.

Keywords: *Perceived Authenticity; Environmental Awareness; Sustainability Motivation; Destination Attachment; Tourist Visit Behaviour*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is increasingly becoming one of the main issues in academic studies and industry practices. The shift in global tourist consumption patterns, especially among millennials and Gen Z, shows a greater tendency towards destinations that emphasise authenticity, emotional attachment, and sustainability values. This trend indicates that modern tourists are no longer focused solely on recreation, but are also seeking authentic, educational experiences that positively impact the environment and local communities. In the context of this study, perceived authenticity is an important factor. Modern tourists increasingly demand authentic experiences in terms of culture, tradition, or interaction with local communities. Destinations that are able to present authenticity in their products and services have a greater opportunity to build tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Emotional attachment influences repeat visit decisions and encourages tourists to engage in pro-environmental behaviour at the destination. In Indonesia, a clear example can be seen in tourist communities that continue to return to certain destinations, such as Mount Bromo or Lake Toba, due to strong emotional ties to the atmosphere, culture, and local community.

These three factors can shape and strengthen environmental awareness, which is the awareness of tourists about the importance of preserving the environment in their tourism activities. This awareness is expected to contribute to the formation of more responsible tourist behaviour, such as minimising carbon footprints, respecting local culture, and supporting conservation activities. In this case, environmental awareness acts as a mediator that bridges the

gap between perception, emotional attachment, and sustainable motivation with the actual behaviour of tourists. Although a number of previous studies have discussed the relationship between authenticity, attachment, and motivation and tourist behaviour (Lee et al., 2013), there are still limitations in understanding the role of environmental awareness as a mediating variable. Most previous studies only emphasise the direct relationship between variables, thus failing to provide a comprehensive picture of how environmental awareness mediates the influence of tourists' psychological factors on their behaviour.

This study is important because it addresses the practical challenge of low tourist awareness of environmentally friendly behaviour in Indonesian destinations, even though these destinations have embraced the principle of sustainability. From a theoretical perspective, this study offers novelty by placing environmental awareness as a mediating variable that explains the mechanism of the relationship between perceived authenticity, destination attachment, and sustainability motivation with tourist visiting behaviour. Thus, this study not only contributes to the enrichment of sustainable tourism literature but also provides practical implications for destination managers and policy makers in designing promotional and educational strategies for tourists that are more focused on sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Perceived Authenticity and Environmental Awareness

Perceived authenticity refers to the extent to which tourists view the tourism experience offered by a destination as real, original, and reflective of local cultural values and traditions. In modern tourism, authenticity is not just about the "uniqueness" of a destination, but rather an important element that creates meaningful experiences that are different from mass tourism, which tends to be generic. High authenticity makes tourists feel more connected to the social and natural environment, potentially increasing their awareness of the importance of maintaining the destination's sustainability. Destinations with an authentic image can foster tourists' concern for cultural and environmental preservation. Some studies criticise the idea that the exploitation of culture for commercial purposes can reduce tourists' environmental awareness because the experience provided is artificial. In other words, low perceived authenticity can actually reduce tourists' concern for sustainability.

H1: Perceived authenticity has a positive effect on environmental awareness.

Destination Attachment and Environmental Awareness

Destination attachment describes the emotional attachment of tourists to a destination, whether affective, cognitive, or conative. This attachment is formed from positive experiences, social interactions, and personal values found by tourists at a destination. Tourists with a high emotional attachment to a destination will be more motivated to contribute to environmental sustainability because they feel a personal connection. In other words, the stronger the tourist's attachment, the higher their level of environmental awareness. Previous studies support this relationship. Tourists with high destination attachment are likelier to engage in pro-environmental behaviour. Emotional attachment to a destination can influence responsible tourist behaviour, such as not damaging facilities, maintaining cleanliness, and supporting conservation practices. Thus, destination attachment creates visit loyalty and fosters environmental awareness as a form of tourist responsibility.

H2: Destination attachment has a positive effect on environmental awareness.

Sustainability, Motivation and Environmental Awareness

Sustainability motivation refers to tourists' urge to participate in activities that support environmental sustainability, local community welfare, and sustainable tourism practices (Lee et al., 2013). Previous studies support the importance of sustainability motivation in shaping environmental awareness. Chen and Tung (2014) found that sustainable tourism motivation is positively related to tourists' intentions to engage in environmentally friendly behaviour. Research by Tourists with sustainable motivation are more aware of the ecological impact of tourism activities and are more likely to adjust their behaviour.

H3: Sustainability motivation has a positive effect on environmental awareness.

Environmental Awareness and Tourist Visiting Behaviour

Environmental awareness refers to tourists' understanding and concern about environmental issues related to their travel activities. This awareness includes knowledge about the negative impacts of tourism on nature, a caring attitude towards ecosystem preservation, and the intention to act in an environmentally friendly manner. Previous literature confirms the positive relationship between environmental awareness and tourist behaviour. Tourists with high environmental awareness are likelier to choose environmentally friendly destinations and engage in pro-environmental behaviour. Environmental awareness can increase the intention to revisit destinations that promote sustainability.

H4: Environmental awareness has a positive effect on tourist visiting behaviour.

Environmental Awareness as a Mediator

Emotional attachment to a destination encourages pro- environmental behaviour only if tourists have high environmental awareness. Lee et al. (2013) also emphasised that sustainable motivation does not necessarily encourage tourist behaviour, but needs to be mediated by strong environmental awareness. Similarly, Authentic experiences increase concern for culture and the environment, which has implications for sustainable tourism behaviour.

H5a: Environmental awareness mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and tourist visiting behaviour.

H5b: Environmental awareness mediates the relationship between destination attachment and tourist visiting behaviour.

H5c: Environmental awareness mediates the relationship between sustainability motivation and tourist visiting behaviour.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method, as it is considered the most appropriate for testing the causal relationship between latent variables in the proposed model. Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares (PLS)-based Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), considering that the research model involved mediating variables and complex relationships. The SEM-PLS approach is also suitable for exploratory research with a relatively moderate sample size. The population in this study was Indonesian domestic tourists who had visited ecotourism destinations or culture-based tourist villages. To obtain relevant data, this study used purposive sampling with the following respondent criteria: (1) had visited at least one culture- or environment-based tourist destination in Indonesia in the last two years, and (2) had direct experience with tourism activities related to nature, culture, or conservation.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the reliability and validity of the instruments were tested using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and AVE. Second, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated to ensure convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. Third, the structural (inner) model was evaluated by considering the R^2, Q^2, and path coefficient values. Next, hypothesis testing was performed using the bootstrapping procedure with a significance level of 5% ($p < 0.05$). Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted to assess the role of environmental awareness in bridging the influence of perceived authenticity, destination attachment, and sustainability motivation on tourist visiting behaviour.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that most respondents were male (74%), reflecting the dominance of men in MSME leadership, although female participation (26%) remained significant. In terms of age, respondents were dominated by the productive age group of 30–39 years (66.7%), followed by 40– 49 years (17.6%) and 20–29 years (13.2%), indicating the active involvement of the main working generation in MSMEs. The educational level of most respondents was relatively high, with many bachelor's degree graduates (58.1%), Diploma graduates (19.6%), and Postgraduate degree holders (7.9%). In comparison, there were fewer high school/vocational school graduates (10.6%) and elementary/junior high school graduates (3.7%). This indicates that respondents have sufficient formal knowledge to understand innovation strategies. Regarding visit frequency, most tourists have visited 5-10 times (73.4%), indicating stability in visits, while 16.2% visit less than 5 times per month and 10.3% visit more than 10 times. The most common travel experience was 3- 10 years (61.8%), followed by less than 3 years (27.2%) and more than 10 years (11%), confirming that MSME visits are still oriented towards productive travellers. Overall, the respondent profile depicts relatively established tourists, led by productive individuals with adequate education, making it relevant to test the relationship between the proposed variables.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Respondents	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	223	74
	Female	78	26
Age	< 20 years old	5	1.6
	20-29 years	40	13.2
	30-39 years	201	66.7
	40-49 years	53	17.6
	50 years and above	2	0.9
Level of Education	Elementary/Junior High School	11	3.7
	High School/Vocational School	32	10.6
	Diploma (D1-D4)	59	19.6
	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	175	58.1
	Master's Degree (S2-S3)	24	7.9
Frequency of SME	Less than 5 times	49	16.2
Tourism (per	5–10 times	221	73.4
month)	More than 10 times	31	10.3
SME Tourism	Less than 3 years	82	27.2

Experience	3-10 years	186	61.8
	10 years and above	33	11

Source: Processed by Researchers (2025)

The results of this study provide an overview of the relationship between the variables of *perceived authenticity* (PA), *destination attachment* (DA), *sustainability motivation* (SM), *environmental awareness* (EA), and *tourist visit behaviour* (TVB). Analysis using PLS shows several significant and insignificant relationships that can be interpreted as follows. First, the hypothesis test results show that perceived authenticity (PA) has a significant positive effect on environmental awareness (EA) (β = 0.632; p < 0.001). This finding shows that authentic tourism experiences, reflecting authentic cultural values and offering destination authenticity, can increase tourists' environmental awareness. The authenticity of a destination encourages tourists to appreciate environmental values more and foster sustainable behaviour. Authentic experiences increase satisfaction and foster tourists' responsibility for environmental sustainability. Thus, it can be concluded that destination authenticity is an important factor in building tourists' ecological awareness.
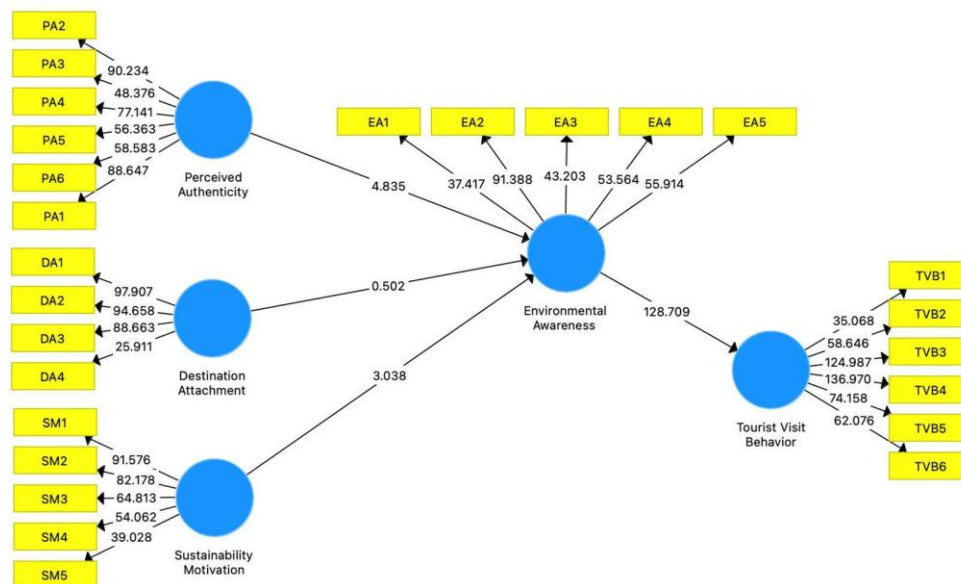

Figure 1. PLS Output Results

Second, destination attachment (DA) does not significantly affect EA (β = 0.090; p = 0.607). These results indicate that even though tourists feel emotionally attached to a destination, this attachment does not always imply increased environmental awareness. Emotional attachment to a destination can encourage pro-environmental behaviour. This difference may be due to the characteristics of the research respondents, who may not have had sufficient in-depth experience to associate destination attachment with sustainability issues. This means that destination attachment must be combined with environmental education to increase tourists' ecological awareness truly.

Third, this study found that sustainability motivation (SM) significantly positively affects EA (β = 0.280; p = 0.002). This means that tourists' motivation to maintain sustainability and nature conservation can increase their awareness of environmental issues. Sustainability motivation is the main driver of pro- environmental awareness and behaviour. In other words, the stronger the motivation of tourists to participate in sustainable tourism, the higher their awareness of the

environmental sustainability

of the destination.

Fourth, environmental awareness (EA) proved to have a very strong and significant effect on tourist visit behaviour (TVB) (β = 0.968; p < 0.001). These results confirm that environmental awareness is a major determinant in shaping tourist visit behaviour. This finding supports the *Value-Belief-Norm* theory, which explains that values and beliefs about the environment will influence awareness, which in turn encourages concrete actions in the form of behaviour. The environmental awareness significantly increases tourists' behavioural intentions to visit environmentally friendly destinations. Therefore, increasing ecological awareness is important in encouraging more sustainable tourism behaviour.

Table 2. Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Variable Relationship	β	T-Statistic	P Value	Description
Direct Relationship					
H1	**PA ⯈ EA**	0.632	4.938	0.000	Significant
H2	**DA ⯈ EA**	0.090	0.515	0.607	Not Significant
H3	**SM ⯈ EA**	0.280	3.163	0.002	Significant
H4	**EA ⯈ VB**	0.968	139.05	0.000	Significant
Mediation Relationship					
H5a	**PA → EA → TVB**	0.612	4.928	0.000	Significant
H5b	**DA → EA → TVB**	0.088	0.514	0.608	Not Significant
H5c	**SM → EA → TVB**	0.271	3.170	0.002	Significant

Source: Processed by the researcher (2025)

Furthermore, the mediation relationship found that EA significantly mediates the influence of PA on TVB (H5a) and SM on TVB (H5c). This means that the authenticity of the travel experience and sustainability motivation will only impact tourist visitation behaviour if it first increases their environmental awareness. Environmental awareness plays an important mediating role between tourist psychological factors and visiting behaviour. Meanwhile, the mediation of DA on TVB through EA (H5b) was not significant, further emphasising that destination attachment does not automatically encourage environmentally friendly behaviour without ecological awareness.

Overall, this study's results indicate that perceived authenticity and sustainability motivation are the main factors shaping environmental awareness, which becomes an important determinant of tourist visitation behaviour. However, destination attachment is not yet strong enough to influence tourists' ecological awareness, so additional strategies in environmental education and the provision of sustainable tourism experiences are needed.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the relationship between perceived authenticity, environmental awareness, and tourist visit behaviour, by including destination attachment and sustainability motivation as contributing variables. The empirical analysis results provide several important findings that strengthen the understanding of tourist behaviour in the context of sustainable tourism. First, the results show that perceived authenticity has a significant effect on increasing environmental awareness. Tourists who view their travel experiences as authentic, original, and reflective of local cultural and environmental values tend to be more aware of the importance of environmental sustainability. This finding confirms that authenticity functions as a destination attraction factor and plays a role in fostering pro-environmental values in tourists. Second, environmental awareness has been proven to be a strong predictor in shaping tourist visit

behaviour. Tourists with high environmental awareness are more likely to exhibit responsible and sustainable visit behaviour, such as reducing negative impacts on the environment, respecting local culture, and supporting environmentally friendly practices. This confirms that increasing environmental awareness can be an effective strategy for destination managers in promoting sustainable tourism practices. Third, the structural model results show strong explanatory power, where the R^2 value shows that environmental awareness is substantially influenced by perceived authenticity, destination attachment, and sustainability motivation. Meanwhile, tourist visit behaviour is more explained by the environmental awareness factor. Thus, this study confirms the central role of environmental awareness as a mediating mechanism that connects perceptions of authenticity with tourist visit behaviour. Overall, this study provides empirical evidence that authenticity and sustainability factors shape tourists' cognitive awareness and encourage the formation of real behaviour in the context of tourist visits. These findings reinforce the argument that sustainable tourism development needs to integrate aspects of cultural authenticity with environmental education to create long-term benefits for both destinations and local communities.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

Although this study makes an important contribution to the development of sustainable tourism literature, several limitations can be used as opportunities for further research. First, in terms of research context, this study was conducted at specific destinations, so the findings may not be universally applicable. To broaden the scope, further research could test this model in various types of destinations, such as ecotourism, cultural heritage tourism, urban tourism, and different cultural contexts. This would help test the level of generalisation of the research results. Second, this study used a cross-sectional design from a methodological approach, so it could not capture changes in tourist perceptions and behaviour over time. Therefore, a longitudinal research design is highly recommended to understand long-term environmental awareness and tourist behaviour dynamics. Third, in terms of variable development, this study is still limited to the main constructions under investigation. Future studies can enrich the conceptual model by incorporating psychological and social factors, such as tourist value orientation, concern for global environmental issues, and social and community influences. Thus, understanding the determinants of tourist behaviour can become more comprehensive. Fourth, in terms of practical implications, subsequent research can test the effectiveness of real interventions, for example, through environmental campaigns, the organisation of authentic cultural events, or community-based tourism programs. Empirical testing of such interventions will provide strategic contributions to formulating sustainable tourism policies. Despite these limitations, this study provides empirical evidence that perceived authenticity is important in increasing environmental awareness, ultimately encouraging more responsible tourist visit behaviour. Further research is expected to refine this conceptual model while providing theoretical and practical contributions to sustainable tourism development.

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