

# Exploring Tourists' Emotional Experiences in Historical and Cultural Tourism Destinations

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**Abstract:** As tourist demands evolve from traditional material satisfaction to higher levels of spiritual and emotional experiences, the role of tourist emotions in the travel process has become increasingly important. This study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess how perceived authenticity and participation affect the emotional generation and behavioral tendencies of 468 tourists visiting six major historical and cultural cities in China (Xi'an, Guilin, Chengdu, Beijing, Hangzhou, and Nanjing). Subsequent subgroup analysis further explored how these effects vary across different demographic segments, including gender, income, education level, and travel experience. The findings indicate that perceived authenticity and participation significantly enhance tourists' positive emotions and place attachment, which in turn greatly increases their intentions to recommend and revisit. By constructing a framework to assess and understand tourist emotional responses and their impacts, this research provides theoretical insights and practical recommendations for tourism management authorities to meet the evolving cultural and spiritual needs of tourists, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of destinations and promoting high-quality development in the tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Historical and Cultural Tourists; Emotional Experience; Behavioral Intentions; SEM Analysis

## 1. Introduction

With the transformation and upgrading of China's economy and society, achieving high-quality development has become one of the core goals of the country's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). The tourism industry has gradually shifted from an emphasis on quantitative expansion to a focus on improving quality, accompanied by significant changes in tourist demands. According to the *China Tourism Scenic Area Development Report (2018)* national tourism demand has transitioned from an early focus on scenic beauty to pursuit of experiential activities and the sharing of a better life [1]. Tourists are increasingly inclined to choose destinations away from traditional popular spots, seeking unique and authentic travel experiences. They have a strong desire to explore local cultures, customs, and the lifestyles of residents [2]. This trend is particularly evident among younger travelers, whose behaviors show a stronger emphasis on personalization and socialization. Modern tourists rely more on social media and travel apps to plan their trips, and share photos, videos, and travel insights to showcase their experiences, becoming an important part of social interaction [3-5]. The influence of emotions on the social interaction aspects has also made it increasingly significant in the tourism process.

However, the tourist experience in China's historical and cultural tourism still remains suboptimal, particularly in rural historical and cultural sites, where there is often a significant gap between tourists' expectations and their actual experiences [6]. Constraints such as the exploration of historical and cultural resources, the updating of cultural projects, and the integration of attractions have all limited the quality of visitors' experiences [7]. In an era where tourists' preferences are shifting toward personalization, authenticity, and experiential travel, emotions play a crucial role in shaping the travel experience. Prior studies have shown that the spatial layout and atmosphere of tourist sites can influence visitors' behavior through emotional responses [8-11]. Given the importance of emotional experiences in contemporary tourism, and the insufficient experiential quality in historical and cultural tourism, this study aims to explore the mechanisms and influencing factors of emotional generation in tourists to enhance the overall travel experience.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theories on Emotion

Regarding the generation of emotional experiences, Arnold [12] proposed the Excitatory Theory of Emotion. The theory suggests that the formation of emotions relies on an individual's cognitive appraisal of external stimuli. This appraisal process involves the individual's perception of the significance, importance, and relationship between the stimulus event and the individual's environment. The appraisal is often accompanied by physiological arousal responses, such as increased heart rate and rapid breathing. The interaction between physiological arousal and emotional appraisal jointly creates the individual's emotional experience.

Existing research suggests that the human information processing system consists of cognitive, emotional, and regulatory systems [13]. Within this framework, emotions can influence the information processing sequence and thereby affect tourism decisions. For instance, negative emotions may prompt tourists to opt for lower-cost options during decision-making to mitigate potential risks [14]. Conversely, in a pleasant environment, enhanced positive emotions may reduce tourists' tendencies to avoid certain destinations. Emotions not only serve a motivational function, prompting individuals to react and act, but they also energize decision-making, leading individuals to make choices that are consistent with their emotional states [15]. The tourism experience itself is a central component of tourists' emotional experiences and significantly impacts their behavioral intentions, interpersonal interactions, and subsequent travel motivations. Thus, the role of emotional factors in tourism behavior research cannot be overlooked.

### 2.2 Research Review

The generation of tourist emotions is closely linked to tourism stimuli, which stem from various factors encountered during travel, including people, events, objects, and both personal and external environmental factors [16, 17]. These factors predominantly include the destination environment, tourism infrastructure, landscape features, atmosphere creation, and social interactions, all of which are objective elements that directly impact tourists' emotional responses.

Authenticity involves physical environments and cultural attributes, and is also influenced by tourists' subjective perceptions and sociocultural backgrounds. Existing research indicates that Chinese tourists tend to pursue "symbolic authenticity" [18], which, rather than focusing on the objective historical authenticity of heritage, emphasizes symbolic truths that align with their own values and cultural understandings. In ethnic tourism contexts, tourists often associate authenticity with poverty, while local residents view culture as dynamically evolving, with its authenticity depending on the living practices of the ethnic culture [19]. For cultural heritage tourists, perceptions of authenticity are crucial stimuli that shape their travel motivations and evaluations of experiences.

In the era of the mobile internet information explosion, tourists can easily access a wealth of travel-related information, displaying increased autonomy and proactivity. They are no longer content with passively accepting standardized tourism products; instead, they seek to shape personalized experiences through deep involvement, becoming leaders in tourism activities and co-creators of experiential value [20]. Tourist participation is closely linked to the physical environment, atmosphere, and social interactions of the travel destination. The interaction between tourists and their environment, along with their active participation, are significant sources of tourists' emotional responses.

Emotions are psychological and physiological responses of individuals to external stimuli, formed following situational assessments, and they trigger specific behavioral tendencies. In recent years, positive emotions have received extensive attention in tourism research and marketing, recognized as drivers and triggers of positive behaviors. In psychology, literature identifies two main methods for studying emotions: the categorical approach, which views emotions as specific affective states such as happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger, and disgust [21], and the dimensional approach, which conceptualizes emotions using a few dimensions, such as positive and negative valences, pleasure, arousal, dominance, and a singular dimension of pleasure-pain [22]. The dimensional approach provides a more concise description of emotional experiences. In the tourism industry, the measurement of emotions tends to utilize the dimensional approach, assessing dimensions like positive and negative emotions [23, 24].

Place attachment is considered a fundamental element of the emotional bond between individuals

and specific locations. Psychologically, place attachment comprises three aspects: affective (emotions and feelings), cognitive (thoughts, knowledge, beliefs), and conative (actions and behaviors) [25]. In this emotional construct, individuals are the subjects who create meanings through their experiences in a place; significant psychological activities occur in these locations, leading to emotional and cognitive changes; the place itself is the object of emotional attachment, an essential component characterized by its spatial, social, and physical attributes. Gu and Ryan [26] argued that when the material and social conditions of a place meet people's needs and preferences, individuals develop an attachment to that location. The level of tourists' involvement and their sense of awe towards a destination are also precursors to place attachment [27], with highly involved tourists more likely to develop a dependency on the destination [28]. Currently, perceived value is considered the primary driving factor in the formation of place attachment [29].

In summary, this study, grounded in emotional appraisal and attitude-behavior theories, explores the emotions of historical and cultural tourism visitors through stimulus experience and develops a framework for the evolution of tourist emotions. Within this framework, positive emotions generated from experiential cognitive appraisals and place attachment formed through interactions with the location are identified as two direct affective factors influencing tourist loyalty. They also mediate the impact of authenticity and participation on tourist loyalty. Based on relevant theories and existing research findings, this study proposes the following research framework and hypotheses, as illustrated in Figure 1.

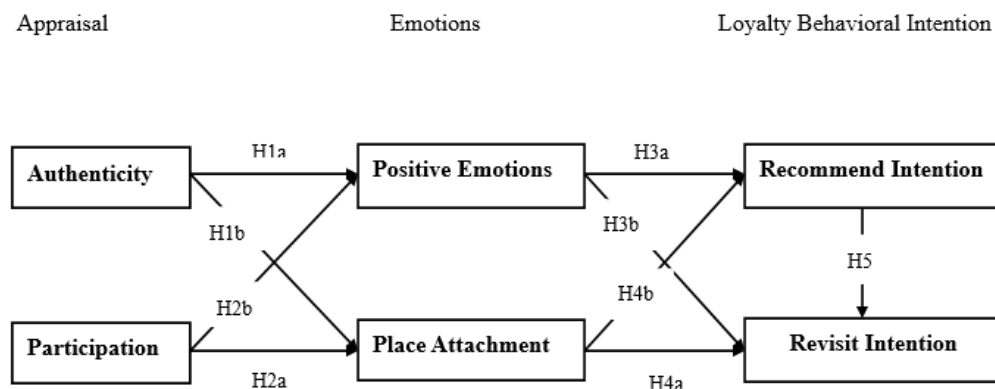


Figure 1 Research Framework and Hypotheses

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Measurement of Variables

This study defines authenticity as the enjoyment and perception of authenticity (historical and cultural attractions) experienced by tourists, which relates both to the object itself and the experiential presence of the tourists, categorized into objective authenticity and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the tourists' perceptions of the material and cultural forms, such as the architecture, interior facilities, layout, landscape, and physical artifacts, as well as customs and atmosphere. Existential authenticity is related to the tourists' perceptions and sensory experiences, including experiencing proximity to history and feeling genuine experiences. Based on the actual context of historical and cultural tourism destinations, this study draws on the research of scholars such as Kolar and Zabkar [30] and Guan and Luo [31] employs eight items to measure these concepts.

Tourism participation is defined as the process through which tourists enhance their travel experience by engaging in information exchange, active interaction, and innovative behaviors during the tourism consumption process. This is divided into two dimensions: information exchange and interaction-innovation. It includes activities related to information such as pre-trip preparation, on-site information lookup and communication, and post-visit information sharing. Interaction and innovation involve tourists' participation in activities, interaction, and innovation during their stay at the destination. This study draws on the research of Taheri, Jafari [32], Li and Shi [20] and Liu and Lin [33], utilizing eight items to measure tourist participation.

Considering the Chinese cultural context and how tourists' express emotions, this study categorizes

the positive emotions of tourists at historical and cultural tourism destinations into three dimensions: (1) general positive emotions (such as interest, happiness, satisfaction), (2) nostalgia, and (3) awe and related emotional experiences. Place attachment includes tourists' dependence on the physical attributes, functions of destination activities, services, and attractions; cultural preferences; value alignments; identification with the consistency between themselves and the tourist sites; and social connections present in historical and place events. Tourist place attachment encompasses place dependence, place identity, and social ties, all within the same dimension.

Tourist loyalty, as defined by Suhartanto, Dean [34], refers to tourists' psychological endorsement of and intention to revisit a destination. Specific metrics include revisit intention and word-of-mouth recommendation. Given the different impacts of revisit intentions and word-of-mouth recommendations on business strategies, this study measures these two dependent variables separately.

All variables are measured using a five-point Likert scale.

### **3.2 Sampling**

China is rich in historical and cultural tourism resources, boasting 47 World Cultural Heritage sites and 4 sites that are both cultural and natural heritage. Approximately 40% of the national 3A to 5A rated scenic areas are historical and cultural tourism sites. Additionally, there are 140 national historical and cultural cities, 81 ancient towns, and 8,155 traditional villages listed as national-level protected traditional villages (Data source: Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Ministry of Culture, and National Cultural Heritage Administration).

Based on the research objectives and feasibility, this study employs a combination of convenience sampling and judgmental sampling methods. Due to the rich cultural relic resources, concentration of historical buildings, well-preserved traditional layouts, and significant cultural, economic, political, and military historical values, this research selects the first batch of 24 national historical and cultural cities as the focus of the study. Drawing on the sampling methods used by Cheng, Wang [35] and Bao, Yin [36], The study obtained the online search popularity of 24 historical and cultural cities among residents in 31 Chinese provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) from January 1, 2019, to May 31, 2023, using Baidu Index data. The top six cities were Xi'an, Guilin, Chengdu, Beijing, Hangzhou, and Nanjing, with average daily Baidu Index values of 2,241, 1,276, 1,148, 888, 807, and 767, respectively. Based on these findings, the study determined that tourists visiting historical and cultural attractions in these six cities would serve as the sampling population for this research.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

To ensure the representativeness of the survey data, the study considers respondents' age, occupation, education, and income during sampling to ensure a relatively balanced distribution across different groups. Additionally, to reduce recall bias, respondents are asked to select their most recent historical and cultural tourism experience within the past 5 years and evaluate a specific historical and cultural tourism site based on that experience.

The researchers have enlisted the assistance of 15 friends from Xi'an, Beijing, Guilin, Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Nanjing to share the questionnaire within their social groups. These individuals come from diverse professional backgrounds, including tour guides, university professors, company executives, and scenic area staff. They distribute the questionnaires in their respective workplaces, such as during company meetings, in classrooms, or at their places of work, to colleagues, students, or peers to enhance data quality.

The researchers use their personal social networks to contact potential respondents who meet the study's criteria to fill out an electronic questionnaire and encourage them to forward it to others, thus broadening the sample coverage.

The researchers have also engaged ten friends in Guangxi and Zhejiang to help distribute the questionnaire through work-related and social networking groups, ensuring participation from different regions and professional groups.

#### 4. Data Analysis

This study collected a total of 545 complete questionnaires. After excluding those completed in less than 120 seconds, as the respondents may not have fully understood the content, the study retained 486 valid questionnaires. The validity rate of the questionnaires is 89%.

The demographic variables of the sample are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1 Demographic Variables (n=486)*

Items	Dimension	Frequency	Percentage
Gener	Male	201	41.4
	Female	285	58.
Education	Junior	3	0.6
	Vocational/High	11	2.3
	Associate's	52	10.7
	Bachelor's	277	57
	Master's	143	29.4
Age	20 years and below	14	2.9
	20-29 years	182	37.4
	30-39 years	184	37.9
	40-49 years	81	16.7
	50-59 years	21	4.3
	60 years and above	4	0.8
Monthly Income	5000¥and Below(768\$ and Below)	180	37
	5001~10000¥(769-1538\$)	192	39.5
	10001~15000¥(1539-2308\$)	64	13.2
	15001~20000¥(2309-3077\$)	30	6.2
	20001 ¥and above(3078\$ and above)	20	4.1
Occupation	Corporate	174	35.8
	Government	117	24.1
	Self-Employed/Entrepreneur	4	0.8
	Freelancers	42	8.7
	Students	112	23.5
	Retired	3	0.6
	Other	34	7

Overall, the valid sample exhibits the following characteristics: the proportion of females is slightly higher than that of males, and the middle-income group is predominant; respondents are predominantly young and generally have a higher level of education; their occupations and incomes are relatively stable. These characteristics are largely consistent with the sampling results of previous related studies in Li, Sui [37] and Wang, Wang [38] 's study.

##### 4.1 Common Method Bias Test

This study employed Harman's single-factor test to detect common method bias (CMB). According to Tehseen, Ramayah [39], if common method bias is present, the first factor in a single-factor analysis should explain more than 40% of the total variance. If it does not, this suggests that the constructs in the questionnaire are independent and that there is no significant common method bias. In this study, principal component analysis without rotation was conducted, and the results showed that the first component had an eigenvalue of 12.917, accounting for 36.906% of the variance, which is below the critical threshold of 40%. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no common method bias present in the data, and the constructs measured by the questionnaire exhibit good independence.

#### 4.2 Construct Validity Analysis

This study evaluates internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The questionnaire consists of 35 items, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.948, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability as each construct's Cronbach's alpha exceeds the commonly accepted standard of 0.7. The Corrected Item-Total Correlations for all constructs exceed the standard threshold of 0.5. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the various constructs, with the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Factors	Code	Mean	Factor loadings	Characteristic value	percentage of variance	Cumulative variance explained	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Authenticity	A1	4.08	0.858	5.157	14.736	14.736	0.933
	A2	4.09	0.845				
	A3	4.08	0.835				
	A4	4.08	0.827				
	A5	4	0.75				
	A6	4	0.708				
	A7	3.86	0.612				
Participation	P1	3.71	0.8	4.61	13.17	27.906	0.899
	P2	3.67	0.771				
	P3	3.64	0.766				
	P4	3.31	0.706				
	P5	2.99	0.706				
	P6	3.68	0.7				
	P7	3.74	0.664				
Place Attachment	PA1	3.94	0.821	3.656	10.445	38.351	0.881
	PA2	3.88	0.778				
	PA3	3.81	0.746				
	PA4	3.36	0.74				
	PA5	3.67	0.698				
Awe	PE11	3.79	0.79	2.29	6.542	44.893	0.855
	PE12	3.72	0.782				
	PE13	3.72	0.779				
Nostalgia	PE21	3.53	0.858	2.39	6.828	51.721	0.89
	PE22	3.45	0.797				
	PE23	3.55	0.763				
General Emotions	PE31	3.82	0.861	2.502	7.149	8.87	0.873
	PE32	3.88	0.819				
	PE33	4.01	0.794				
Recommend Intention	RI1	4.01	0.824	3.412	9.748	68.618	0.931
	RI2	4	0.81				
	RI3	3.91	0.807				
	RI4	3.92	0.806				
Revisit Intention	REI1	3.71	0.804	2.218	6.337	74.955	0.92
	REI2	3.74	0.767				
	REI3	3.53	0.748				

#### 4.3 Model analysis

The study employed AMOS 23.0 for computation, using the maximum likelihood method to estimate the model. The model fit indices indicate a good fit: CMIN/DF is 2.141, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 3. GFI and AGFI both exceed 0.8, falling within the acceptable range, while NFI, TLI, IFI, and CFI all meet the standard of being above 0.9. Additionally, RMR is 0.038, and RMSEA is 0.048, both below the 0.08 threshold, suggesting a well-fitting model. Based on relevant studies, these results confirm a good model fit. The standardized path results are presented in Figure 2.

#### 4.4 Mediation Effect Analysis

In this study, the mediation effects of variables were examined using the Bootstrap resampling method. Specifically, through AMOS 24.0 software, a Bootstrap resampling of 5000 iterations was performed, yielding Bias-Corrected and Percentile interval values at a 95% confidence level. Following the criteria proposed by Wen and Ye [40], if the value range of a variable within the 95% confidence interval does not include 0, it indicates a significant mediation effect. The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 3.

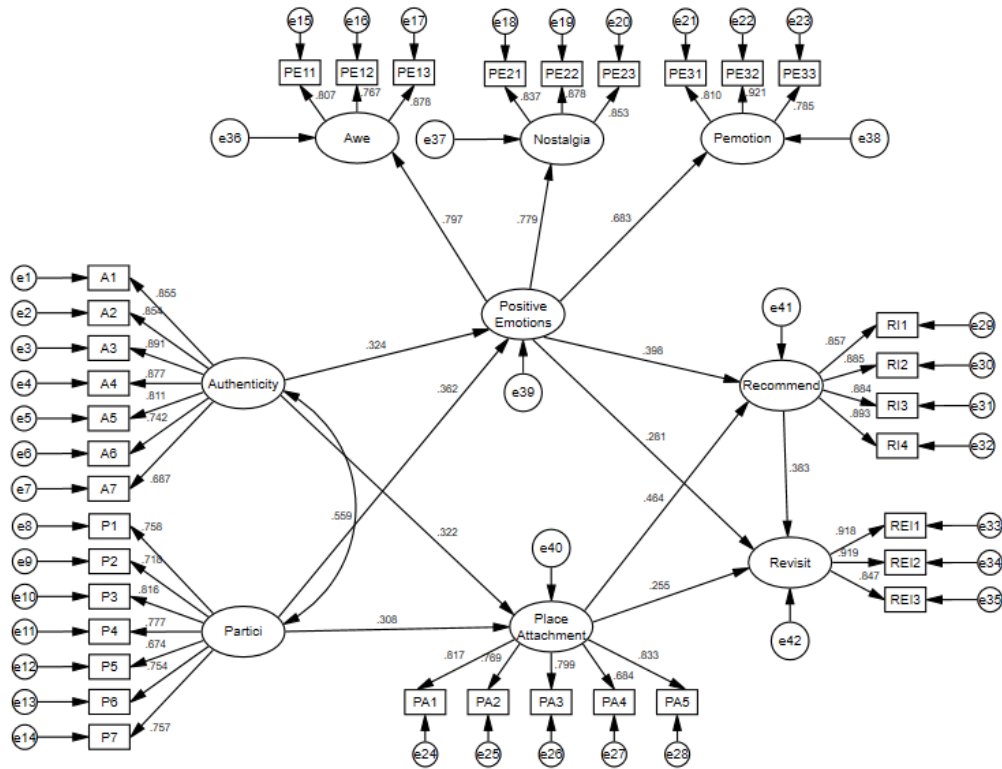


Figure 2 Path Model Diagram

Table 3 Mediating Effect of Variables

Independent Variable	Mediating Variable	Dependent Variable	Effect Quantity	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI	
				Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
A	PE	RI	0.129	0.07	0.198	0.066	0.195
A	PE	RIE	0.091	0.051	0.141	0.047	0.136
A	PA	RI	0.128	0.068	0.201	0.063	0.196
A	PA	RIE	0.09	0.045	0.151	0.042	0.147
P	PE	RI	0.144	0.087	0.208	0.086	0.207
P	PE	RIE	0.102	0.051	0.164	0.051	0.163
P	PA	RI	0.122	0.064	0.194	0.063	0.192
P	PA	RIE	0.086	0.048	0.135	0.046	0.132

Note: A: Authenticity; P: Participation; PE: Positive Emotions; PA: Place Attachment; RI: Recommend Intention; REI: Revisit Intention.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The factors influencing the generation of emotions in tourists visiting historical and cultural sites are numerous. This study focused on perceived authenticity and engagement as antecedent variables for the generation of tourist emotions, which are also independent variables in the research framework. The path coefficients for the impact of perceived authenticity and engagement on emotions ranged from 0.308 to 0.326, indicating that the independent variables adequately explain the dependent variables [41]. This suggests that the choice of sub-variables in the research framework is appropriate, allowing for a reliable prediction and explanation of tourists' emotional generation based on their perceptions of authenticity and participation. The study found a significant correlation between perceived authenticity and engagement, indicating that these variables may measure similar underlying dimensions or concepts. Further interviews suggest that the strong association between tourists' perceptions of authenticity and their level of participation could stem from a broader underlying concept of "immersion," with context and involvement having significant impacts on tourist immersion [42]. Although there is a positive correlation between these factors, it remains within an acceptable range for the model.

When individual emotions and place attachment are studied within a single framework, the model exhibits a good fit. The path coefficients for the direct impact of these two types of emotions on loyalty intentions (specifically, the direct effects on recommendation and revisit intentions) range from 0.245 to 0.398, indicating strong explanatory power. This is higher than the direct explanatory power of a single emotion (place attachment) on loyalty, which was 0.21 in Hosany, Prayag [23] 'model, and also surpasses the direct explanatory power reported by Yao and Wang [43] in their study on place attachment and loyalty. In terms of individual emotions, the direct explanatory power of awe on loyalty behaviors in Lv and Wang [44] 'study model is also noted. Thus, it is evident that the research model is advantageous for thoroughly understanding tourists' emotions and effectively explains the influence of these emotions on loyalty intentions.

### **5.1 Authenticity**

Authenticity has a more pronounced effect on place attachment than on positive emotions. Drawing from cognitive and social psychology theories, authentic cultural and physical environments provide unique experiences that create lasting memory imprints in tourists [45]. These emotionally charged memories can be retained over time and reactivated upon recollection, fostering emotional attachment between tourists and the destination [46]. Furthermore, tourists' perceptions of authenticity at a site have a significantly greater impact on place attachment than participation in site activities, demonstrating that perceived authenticity enhances the emotional connection between tourists and the site [43]. Authenticity fosters this psychological connection by triggering feelings of familiarity, resonance, identification, and forming pleasant memories, thus positively influencing the formation of place attachment.

### **5.2 Participation**

Tourist participation has a more significant impact on positive emotions than on place attachment. When tourists actively engage in activities, interact with attractions, or immerse themselves in experiences, they are likely motivated by intrinsic needs, values, and interests, forming a connection with the object. This reflects the importance tourists place on the object, leading to pleasure and satisfaction during the activity. From the perspective of flow theory, when individuals are fully engaged in an activity, they achieve a state of flow, resulting in positive emotional experiences [47]. Therefore, participation, through time investment, interest, focused attention, and interactive innovation, allows tourists to achieve satisfaction and pleasure, thereby fostering positive emotions.

Participation can foster cognitive connections, enabling tourists to delve deeper into understanding and exploring a place, creating richer cognitive impressions that form the basis of attachment [48]. For example, tourists actively asking about local customs or visiting museums can enrich their knowledge of the destination's history and culture, leading to positive cognitive evaluations. These cognitive connections enhance familiarity and understanding of the destination, strengthening emotional attachment [49]. Furthermore, participation in activities can create memorable travel experiences. Such positive memories also shape tourists' pleasant anticipations of revisiting, and the combination of memories and expectations can continuously solidify place attachment [50]. Additionally, participation can increase social ties. Engaging in various interactive and volunteer activities helps tourists meet locals, find common interests, and form social networks. These social connections satisfy tourists' need for a sense of belonging to the place, increasing familiarity and security, which are the social foundations of attachment [51].

### **5.3 Tourist Positive Emotions and Place Attachment**

This study confirms that awe, nostalgia, interest, happiness, and satisfaction are common emotions among tourists at historical and cultural tourism sites in China. Positive emotions are a key driver of tourists' loyalty intentions. The results reinforce the link between positive emotions and loyalty intentions and also demonstrate the connection between emotions and behavioral tendencies.

In terms of positive emotions, tourists' scores on interest, happiness, satisfaction, and awe-related emotional dimensions were significantly higher than their nostalgia scores. This indicates that interests in exploring new things and the joy experienced on-site are direct emotional experiences that are easier to generate, whereas nostalgia is comparatively more complex and profound, and not as directly experienced. Compared to emotions like interest, happiness, and satisfaction, awe is a rarer experience that is more cherished, highlighting how the natural and cultural characteristics or the cultural

atmosphere of historical and cultural sites can elevate tourists' spirits, bringing about a more profound awe experience [52].

When tourists develop strong positive emotional connections to a place, they tend to share these experiences with others, that is, they are willing to recommend the place to others. This is because they want others to also experience the positive experiences they enjoyed, and sharing experiences and emotions can also make people happy. Such strong positive emotional connections also motivate them to revisit the location, consistent with the findings of Jia and Lin [53].

#### 5.4 Research Limitations and Future Research Prospects

The study employed quantitative methods to measure the constructs studied and the causal impacts between them, making the findings more generalizable to other contexts. However, the study did not fully explore tourists' subjective emotional experiences or the complex mechanisms influencing these emotions. Future research could use an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods to study tourists' emotional experiences, to understand and explain the multidimensionality, diversity, and contextual factors of emotional experiences, providing a more comprehensive thematic view. Exploring the underlying explanations for significant or perplexing results found in quantitative research. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods could offer more comprehensive and accurate research conclusions.

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