The impact of online gaming experience on destination visit attitudes: Exploring the mediating role of game landscape authenticity

Zixu Gong (Hainan University, China)
Xianfeng Zhang (Hainan University, China)
Peng Lu (Dhurakij Pundit University, China)

INTRODUCTION

Media-driven tourism research has largely focused on film and television, but video games – with their high interactivity and immersive engagement – offer a new frontier for influencing destination interest. For example, the action-RPG Black Myth: Wukong features vividly rendered Chinese landscapes that have already sparked real-world travel interest. In such games, players often develop strong avatar identities (a sense of oneness with their character) and experience deep absorption and high enjoyment during gameplay. These gaming experiences are hypothesized to heighten players' perceptions of the game landscape's authenticity (the sense that the virtual world faithfully reflects real cultural and natural environments), which in turn may shape their attitudes toward visiting the corresponding real-world destination. Despite these promising observations, little empirical research has examined how gaming experiences translate into tourism motivation. To fill this gap, we draw on Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Liao et al., 2019) and Flow Theory (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) to argue that when players strongly identify with their avatar and become fully immersed, their cognitive and emotional engagement with the game world increases. Authenticity theory (Zhang, Yin, & Peng, 2021; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Yi et al., 2018) further distinguishes constructivist authenticity (objective cultural/historical fidelity) from existential authenticity (personal emotional connection). We integrate these perspectives in a Stimulus–Organism–Response framework: gaming stimuli (avatar identity, absorption, enjoyment) influence internal authenticity perceptions (constructivist and existential), which then affect players' attitudes toward the real-world destination depicted in the game.

METHOD

Research on media-driven tourism has traditionally focused on film and television, showing that such media can shape destination images and increase travel interest (Beeton, 2006; Riley et al., 1998). More recently, scholars have begun to examine the role of video games, which offer interactive and immersive experiences that may influence real-world tourism decisions (Yin, Cai, & Tang, 2024).

Social Identity Theory suggests that players who identify strongly with their in-game avatars—such as Sun Wukong in Black Myth: Wukong—may adopt the avatar's feelings and perspectives. This identification could lead to stronger perceptions of authenticity in the game world. Based on this, we propose:

H1: Avatar identity positively affects constructivist authenticity.

H2: Avatar identity positively affects existential authenticity.

Flow Theory explains how immersion and enjoyment lead to deep psychological involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When players are fully absorbed in a game, they may see the virtual setting as more believable and meaningful. Enjoyment also strengthens emotional connection. Thus:

H3: Immersion positively affects constructivist authenticity.

H4: Enjoyment positively affects constructivist authenticity.

H5: Immersion positively affects existential authenticity.

H6: Enjoyment positively affects existential authenticity.

Authenticity Theory distinguishes two types: constructivist authenticity refers to cultural credibility, while existential authenticity is about personal, emotional connection (Wang, 1999). When players find a game culturally authentic, they are more likely to feel emotionally engaged:

H7: Constructivist authenticity positively affects existential authenticity.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model offers a framework to understand how media experiences shape behaviors. In this model, avatar identity, immersion, and enjoyment are stimuli; authenticity perceptions are internal states; and tourism attitudes are responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Therefore:

H8: Constructivist authenticity positively affects tourism attitudes.

H9: Existential authenticity positively affects tourism attitudes.

Based on this hypotheses development, our research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

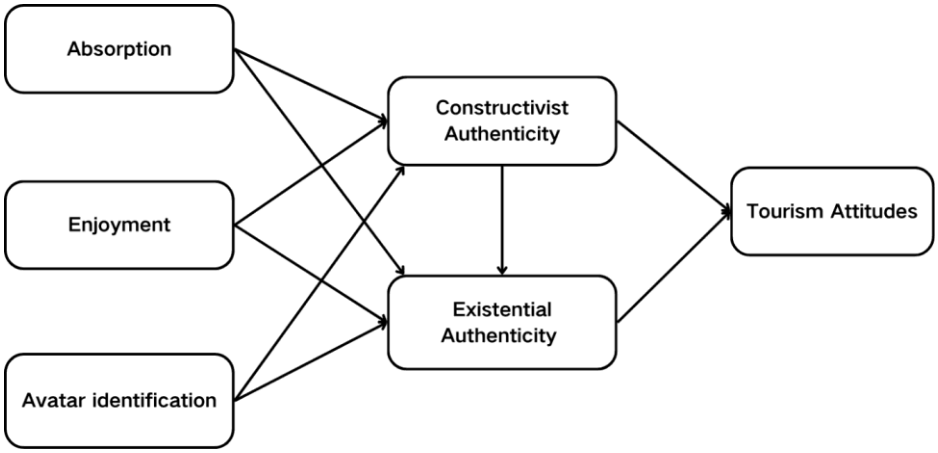

Figure 1. Research framework

We tested this model via an online survey of Black Myth: Wukong players (March–April 2025). Participants were screened for genuine gameplay experience, yielding 300 valid responses. All constructs were measured with multi-item seven-point Likert scales. Avatar identity was measured by four items assessing self-extension through the avatar (adapted from Liao et al., 2019). Game experience included absorption and enjoyment (six and five items respectively from the GAMEX scale of Eppmann, Bekk, & Klein, 2018). Authenticity perceptions were divided into constructivist and existential authenticity (five items each, adapted from Zhang et al., 2021 and Zhao et al., 2024). Tourism attitudes toward the game's real-world setting were assessed with semantic differential scales (e.g. pleasant–unpleasant; adapted from Lam & Hsu, 2006). We then used partial least squares structural equation modeling (SmartPLS) to estimate the relationships among these constructs.

FINDINGS

The structural model largely supported the hypotheses. Avatar identification had significant positive effects on both constructivist and existential authenticity, and enjoyment similarly enhanced both authenticity dimensions. Absorption positively affected constructivist authenticity ($\beta \approx 0.123$, $p < .05$) but did not significantly influence existential authenticity ($\beta \approx 0.065$, $p > .20$). In line with our model, constructivist authenticity strongly predicted existential authenticity ($\beta \approx 0.323$, $p < .001$). Finally, both authenticity dimensions had robust positive effects on tourism attitudes: higher constructivist ($\beta \approx 0.315$, $p < .001$) and existential ($\beta \approx 0.385$, $p < .001$) authenticity led to more favorable attitudes toward the real-world destination. In sum, all hypothesized paths were supported except the link from absorption to existential authenticity, confirming that game-induced authenticity serves as a key mediator.

The specific path coefficients and significance results are shown in Figure 2. and Table 3. In conclusion, except for Hypothesis H7, most of the hypotheses proposed in this study have been supported by the data, and the overall research results are consistent with the expected path relationships of the theoretical model.

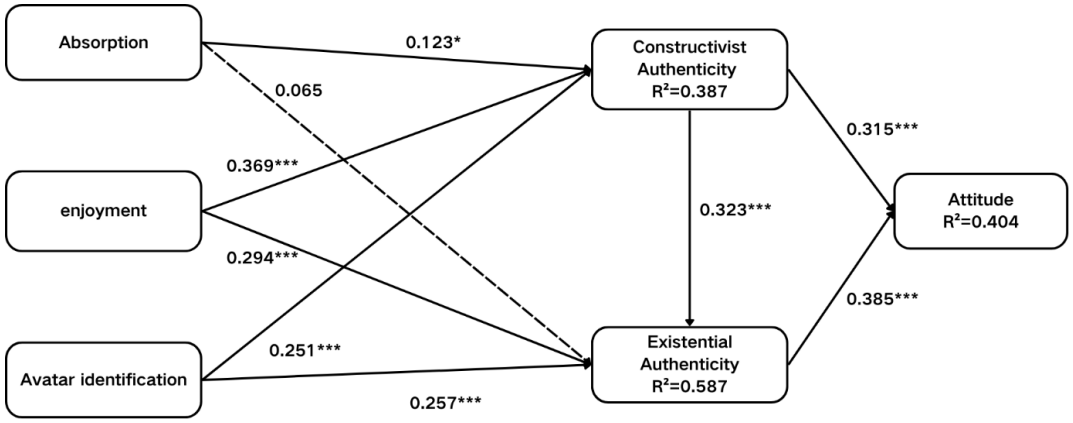

Figure 2. Structural path estimates model

IMPLICATIONS OR CONCLUSION

This study advances theory by synthesizing Social Identity, Flow, and Authenticity theories within a Stimulus–Organism–Response framework. It demonstrates that identity-based and immersive game experiences can foster strong perceptions of authenticity in virtual landscapes, which then drive real-world tourism attitudes. Notably, constructivist authenticity emerges as a critical cognitive conduit between gameplay stimuli and emotional engagement. Practically, the findings suggest that game developers and destination marketers should more closely integrate their efforts. For developers, this means designing richly detailed, culturally authentic game worlds and personalized avatars to deepen players' flow and emotional investment. For tourism authorities and DMOs, it encourages collaborations with popular games or IPs – for example, co-creating branded game content or themed travel experiences – to convert the virtual enthusiasm of players (especially younger audiences) into real visits. In effect, aligning narrative authenticity and immersive design across gaming and marketing can create powerful new pathways for experiential tourism.

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