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## Article

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## **The Influence of Destination Experience on Destination Loyalty in an Emerging Economy**

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### **Abstract**

Destination loyalty has gained prominence because of the growing competition among tourist destinations. This study aims to test the influence of destination experiences (experience authenticity and experience quality) on destination loyalty. Further, tourist engagement was tested as a mediator between destination experiences and loyalty. Survey data were collected onsite from 600 random tourists visiting the Swat and Chitral districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan and analyzed through structural equation modeling techniques using Smart PLS 3.9 software. Experience authenticity is the stronger antecedent of destination loyalty. Furthermore, the relationship between destination experience component and destination loyalty is mediated by tourist engagement. This study differentiates between extraordinary and ordinary destination experiences, represented by experience authenticity and experience quality. A theoretical network was validated, connecting destination experience, tourist engagement and destination loyalty. Destination management organizations can use this model to coordinate the efforts of attractions, service providers and tourists to co-create optimal destination experience.

**Keywords:** tourist engagement, experience authenticity, experience quality, interaction quality, physical environment quality, destination loyalty, Pakistan.

### **1. Introduction**

The travel and tourism sector ]'/has expanded significantly, despite occasional shocks like the war on terror and covid-19 pandemic over the past decade (Ji & Prentice, 2021). The Travel and Tourism World Economic Impact Report explains that the tourist industry witnessed a growth in the number of tourists to 1460 million in 2019 from 5 million in 2005. Furthermore, tourism spending escalated from 400 to 1481 billion USD worldwide during the stated period accounting for 10.3% of the world GDP (WTTC, 2019). In response to this growth in tourism, the development of new tourism destinations increased,

and the competition among existing destinations has intensified globally (Camilleri, 2018). Pakistan is an attractive tourist destination, and several independent organizations like Frobe Magazine and Conde Nast Traveler ranked it as one of the world's most popular tourist destinations for the year 2020 (The Daily Tribune). Despite the encouraging statistics, the tourism industry accounts for only 3.8% of Pakistan's GDP. Therefore, the marketers of tourism destinations need to understand tourists' mindsets to devise appropriate strategies in emerging tourist destinations like Pakistan (Moon, Habib, & Attiq, 2015).

One of the fundamental and crucial components of tourism marketing has been destination loyalty for the past twenty years (Lv & McCabe, 2020). Marketing researchers have investigated the mechanism for destination loyalty formation (Cossío-Silva, Revilla-Camacho, & Vega-Vázquez, 2019). The psychological perspective of decision-making has remained the focus of past investigations, and quality, price, switching cost, and satisfaction have been identified as the core drivers of destination loyalty. Recent developments in consumer research (Moon et al., 2022), particularly in destination marketing, emphasize the vitality of the sociological perspective by acknowledging the new roles of customers as co-owners and co-creators of the brands (Gong & Yi, 2018). Consequently, an integral goal of tourist destinations is to activate tourist engagement in the destination experience to create experience value and destination loyalty (Chen et al., 2021). However, theoretical and empirical evidence is relatively scarce (Li et al., 2021).

Tourist destinations are experience-serving sites since the end product of the destination is the memorable experience. Moreover, this experience is a co-creational outcome of the tourist engagement in activities and interactions with service providers and attractions at the destination. Contemporary sociological theorists believe that a brand value originates from outer relationships between tourists and destinations; therefore, brands should focus on sociological, relational approaches such as experiential marketing and consumer/ tourist engagement (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Li et al., 2021). Consequently, the experiential perspective of tourist decision-making is a promising new area of investigation (Gupta, Dogra, & George, 2018; Harrigan, Roy, & Chen, 2020; Loureiro & Sarmiento, 2019; Rosado-Pinto, Loureiro, & Bilro, 2020). Consequently, this study aims to 1) investigate the experiential drivers of destination loyalty and 2) investigate the mediating influence of tourist engagement between destination experience and destination loyalty.

The proposed tourist experience-based model of destination loyalty formation explains the relative importance of destination factors and tourist role in the co-creation of tourist experience, thus contributing to the value co-creation theory and its application in destination marketing. The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences, as represented by experience quality and experience authenticity in this study, aids in better design and management of tourist destinations that not only engage tourists optimally in the experience but also result in destination loyalty.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Customer/Tourist Engagement

The idea of tourist engagement (TE) was derived from customer engagement (CE), which is about the tourist's psychological state, whether they are cognitively or emotionally immersed in the experience (Huang & Choi, 2019). It reflects the degree to which a tourist is cognitively and emotionally connected to the destination amenities, activities, people, and environment during his visit (Hao, 2020). This definition is based on the attitudinal view of the concept, which treats CE as a psychological condition that results from customer interaction and collaboration with a certain brand and actions associated with that brand. Contrary to this, early marketing literature highlighted the behavioral view of CE, defining the concept as "Customers' behavior toward a brand or company besides what is required for making a purchase. Other views on customer engagement include customer-brand connection (Spratt et al., 2009) and customer co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). In summary, customer engagement is viewed differently as a (1) psychological state, (2) manifested behavior, (3) co-creation, (4) and psychological relationship between customers and brands.

Customer/tourist engagement has got pull in the tourism and hospitality industry due to its favorable influence on the behavioral intentions of tourist usage, patronage, word-of-mouth (WOM), contentment, trust, loyalty and advocacy (Bilro, Loureiro, & Ali, 2018; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2018; Rather, Hollebeek, & Islam, 2019; Sharma & Sarmah, 2019; Tu, Neuhofer, & Viglia, 2018). Furthermore, customer engagement improves CRM quality and self-brand linkage (Harrigan et al., 2018). Consequently, we may conclude that tourist engagement represents the psychological condition of tourists resulting from interaction or experiences with the destination brands (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011), which affects their behavior towards the destination brand.

### 2.2 Antecedents of Customer/ Tourist Engagement

#### 2.2.1 Experience Authenticity (The Extraordinary Destination Experience)

"Experience Authenticity refers to how a given experience feels true or genuine, not reproduced or counterfeit (Yi, Lin, Jin, & Luo, 2017). The authenticity of an experience can arise from the attractions, places, or performances at destinations (Loureiro & Sarmiento, 2018; Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016). In literature, three different kinds of authenticity have been identified: existential, constructive, and objective. Those who adopt an objective approach treat authenticity as the originality of a toured place or event (Park, Choi, & Lee, 2019). These scholars define authenticity as the origin or essence of an object. The constructivists view authenticity as symbolic meaning (i.e., expectations or schemas), the truth about the essence of the destination brand created by the socio-public discourse process, or the marketing communication of the destination (Cohen, 2002). The existential and postmodernists view authenticity as a state of consciousness that permits people to feel

liberated and partake in activities they typically avoid because to their social roles in daily life (Kim & Jamal, 2007).

Tourist experience involves interacting with various groups like service providers, local communities, destination management, and other tourists (Zhang, Chen, & Hu, 2019). The perception of authenticity of these interactions affects tourist engagement in these experiences. Customers/tourists are influenced to collaborate with the business and co-create value when they believe the experience to be authentic. (Nadeem et al., 2020). Customers are more inclined to interact when they believe what they see is near the truth; therefore, developing authentic experiences can improve customer engagement. On the other hand, customers who do not trust an authentic experience may be hesitant to share their operant resources with the firm (Zhang et al., 2019). When tourists believe that a tourist place or destination is genuine, they are encouraged to go there and maintain their interest in the destination experience (Lynch & Sheldon, 2020; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019) Following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

➤ **H1:** Experience authenticity positively affects tourist engagement

### 2.2.2 Experience Quality (Ordinary Destination Experience)

Experience quality refers to a customer's cognitive and emotional assessment of their direct and indirect contacts with services, as well as the physical and social environment of the firm/destination (Experiencescape) (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). Transport, hotel, shopping, traffic, safety & security, and crowdedness are the factors that might be classified as part of the destination experiencescape that affects the tourist perception of the overall quality of a destination (Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, Hall, & Hatamifar, 2021).

The following four major factors have been identified to reflect experience quality, i.e., interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, and access quality (Wu, Wong, & Cheng, 2014). The first aspect of experience quality is interaction quality, which focuses on delivering quality and employee attitudes, conduct, knowledge, and problem-solving skills (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Grönroos, 1984). The next dimension, the physical environment quality, focuses on a built environment where the destination offers services, including the place's architecture, amenities, and atmosphere. Outcome quality, the third dimension, focuses on the experience results, demonstrating what customers get from experience, precisely whether the output quality meets the needs and preferences of the consumer. Access quality refers to the comfort level and information of the destination and measures how quickly and easily visitors may reach their chosen area.

Previous research has attempted to explain how experience quality and customer engagement is linked in different contexts (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2018; Roy, Shekhar, Lassar, & Chen, 2018). In the financial sector, Moliner-Tena et al. (2019) found that positive customer experiences are essential to changing how customers engage with bank branches. The study found that when bank customers perceive their experience with bank

branch staff and facilities, they tend to engage more with the bank. Ahn and Back (2018) studied the engagement behavior of the tourist towards integrated tourism resorts and found favorable engagement behavior results when visitors found the experience of high quality. It has been found that quality experiences are vital precursors of tourist engagement and immersion in the tourism experience (Teng, 2021). There is however lack of studies on the destination context (Ahn & Back, 2018). The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

- **H<sub>2</sub>:** Experience quality positively affects tourist engagement.

### *2.3 Destination Loyalty*

Loyalty has been a key theme in destination marketing and management studies for the last 20 years, offering a heterogeneous picture of tourist loyalty drivers. However, researchers unanimously believe that loyalty is essential because it makes sense to the future relationships between tourists and destinations (Marina, Kartini, Sari, & Padmasasmita, 2016). Tourism literature defines and examines customer loyalty from behavioral and attitudinal perspectives (Farooq & Moon, 2020). Behavioral loyalty means systematic and frequent revisits of a place over time, while attitudinal loyalty is the emotional attachment that visitors have to a destination, manifested primarily by their inclination to visit again and suggest it to others. (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019; Suhartanto, Clemes, & Wibisono, 2018). Attitudinal loyalty involves several behavioral intentions, such as the likelihood of returning, preferring over the competitors and recommending it to others (Chi & Qu, 2008; Patwardhan et al., 2020). The current study adopted the attitudinal view of the concept of destination loyalty and followed the conceptualization of So, King, and Sparks (2014). Thus, we define destination loyalty as the tourist's intention to revisit the destination and recommendation to other friends and relatives.

A tourist engaged with a destination has a more favorable view of it and is more likely to return and be loyal to it (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Tourists absorbed in their experiences, in essence, are meeting their special needs and associate the destination with their selves, which improves their loyalty (Islam, Rahman, & Hollebeek, 2017). Engaging tourist experiences, therefore, increases destination loyalty. According to recent studies, highly involved tourists are inclined to be loyal to the destination. (Chen et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Although researchers have found that CE positively affects consumer loyalty, this relationship in the tourism context remains understudied (Islam et al., 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

- **H<sub>3</sub>:** Tourist engagement positively affects destination loyalty

In the highly alienated and commercialized world, tourist places with authentic experiences offer an environment where tourists can uncover their true selves, creating favorable attitudes and behavior towards such places (Alhouthi et al., 2016; Napoli et al., 2014). When a destination offers authentic experiences, tourists are more inclined to visit again and tell others about it (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Their desire for authenticity has been satisfied (Chen et al., 2020). In heritage tourism, the authenticity of the place has been found to

affect tourists' loyalty (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

- **H4:** Experience authenticity positively affects destination Loyalty.

Tourists evaluate destinations on various factors such as destination design, the constructed environment, amenities, service quality and convenience, collectively termed destination pull factors. To a large extent, these pull factors are under the control of the service providers and destination management organizations. Experience quality is a tourist evaluation of a destination on these pull factors and the extent to which these fulfill his/her needs, the push factors (Sharma & Sarmah, 2019). According to research on tourism, the perceived quality of the visitor experience is the crucial factor influencing visitors' loyalty to a destination. (Cossío-Silva et al., 2019; Jeong & Kim, 2019). It is therefore proposed that:

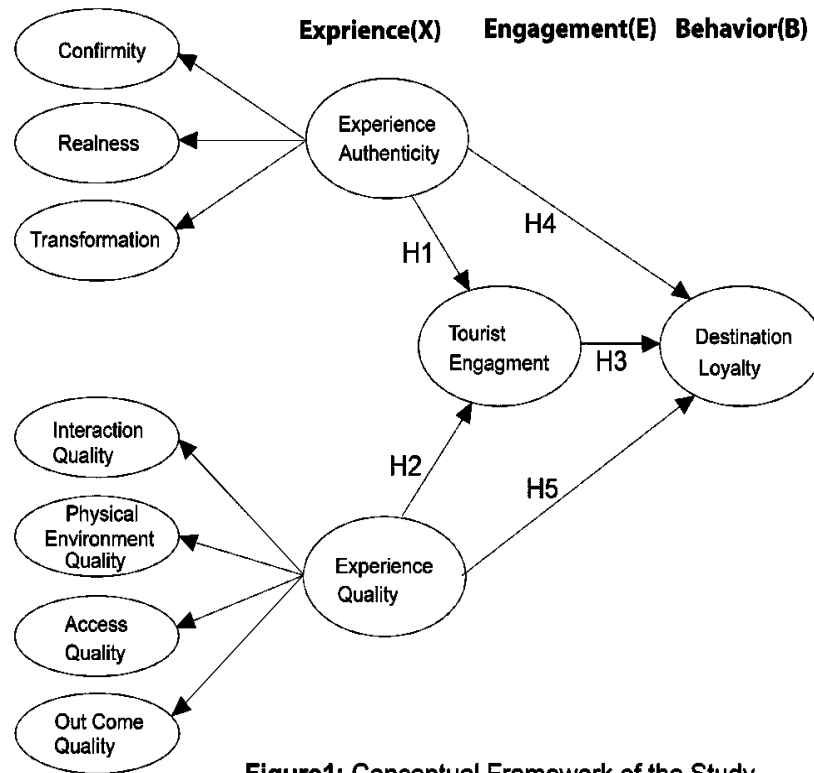
- **H5:** Experience quality positively affects destination loyalty.

#### *2.4 Mediating Role of Tourist Engagement*

The above-hypothesized relationships indicate that tourist engagement is developed when the tourists interact with an authentic and high-quality environment, activities and services of the destination (Destination experience), which in turn affects their loyalty towards the destination. Therefore, the significant mediation role of tourist engagement between destination experience elements (experience authenticity and experience quality) and destination loyalty can be proposed as follows:

- **H6:** Tourist engagement mediates the relationship between experience authenticity and destination loyalty
- **H7:** Tourist engagement mediates the relationship between experience quality and destination loyalty

The hypothesized relationships among the study variables experience authenticity, experience quality (Destination experience), tourist engagement and destination loyalty are depicted in figure 1 below.



**Figure1: Conceptual Framework of the Study**

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection

A survey was completed at various natural and cultural attractions of Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. KP is an attractive tourist destination because of its natural beauty, unique culture and ancient civilization (e.g., Gandhara and Kalash). It offers a host of tourist experiences and attractions like nature-based tourism, family vacations, backpacking, farm tourism, water sports and skiing, and history and heritage sites that attract national and international tourists. Onsite data were collected randomly from tourists visiting various province locations during September 2022 using a structured questionnaire. The study used a total of 600 completed questionnaires.

#### 3.2 Survey Instrument

The demographic information for the respondents was included in the first part of the questionnaire. The second part of the questionnaire measured the study variables; experience authenticity, experience quality, tourist engagement and destination loyalty.



Each measurement item was taken from an existing scale and modified to match the needs of the study. The response on items ranged from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree" on a 5-point Likert scale. Experience authenticity and experience equality have been conceptualized as second-order reflective constructs, with first-order constructs as their dimensions, as suggested in the previous studies (Wu et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2019). The items on experience authenticity were adapted from Spielmann et al. (2018). The scale, in total, contains 16 items associated with three first-order constructs: conformity, realness, and transformation related to a higher-order experience authenticity construct. The items on experience quality were adapted from Wu et al. (2018). Eight items represent four interrelated first-order factors: interaction quality, physical environment quality, access quality and outcome quality related to higher-order experience quality construct. The tourist engagement was viewed as uni-dimensional, as proposed by France et al. (2016), and measured using six items scale. This study adapted an attitudinal view of destination loyalty.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Results**

Before conducting analysis, data were screened for missing values and suspicious responses like the one making a straight line or diagonal (Moon & Attiq, 2018). If the missing data in the questionnaire exceeds 15%, removing the data from the data file is suggested (Hair et al., 2016). Such responses were removed from the data list. The remaining data set was tested for the common method biasness because the researchers obtained data from the same respondents and on a single time point on all the independent and the dependent variables. No variable alone explained more than 50 % variance in the endogenous variable, indicating no problem of common method bias Podsakoff (2003).

The model contained two higher-order constructs, i.e., Experience authenticity and experience quality. Formative or reflective models can be used to measure such higher-order constructs. As in both constructs, the indicators or elements manifest or reflect the underlying constructs, not forming or contributing towards the constructs; the study used reflective measurement models as suggested by Bollen & Long (1992). Furthermore, the study used PLS-SEM instead of covariance-based SEM for model construction and data analysis because the fundamental objective of the study was theory testing and prediction of dependent variables, i.e., destination loyalty (Reinartz, Haenlein, & Henseler, 2009).

##### *4.1 Sample Profile*

Concerning age, males dominate the sample by 65.7 %. The age category 16-25 is the largest and contains almost half of the respondents. Most of the respondents had an undergraduate level of education (46.8 %). As expected, most respondents (64.8 %) were Pakistani citizens. However, there was a good representation of foreigners (35.2%) in the sample. Recreation was the primary purpose of visit for most (70.3%) of the visitors.

#### 4.2. Structural Equation Modelling

##### 4.2.1. Measurement Model Analysis

The researcher assessed the first-order measurement model for its reliability. Four items with low loading were removed from the eight-item scale measuring conformity to increase the Average variance extracted (AVE) of indicators above 0.5 (Wong, 2016). Table 1 demonstrates that, except for four loadings between 0.62 to 0.69, most item loadings are over the 0.7 threshold value (Chin, 1998). As per the Straub (1989) recommendation of a lower threshold of 0.5 for factor loading, these items were retained (Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, Jaafar, & Ramayah, 2017). Table 1 demonstrates the internal reliability measured through composite reliability (CR) values. CR value for all the measurement scales is above the suggested threshold level of 0.70 (Chin, 1998). It ranges from 0.76 to 0.79, demonstrating good internal reliability.

**Table 1: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

Items	Loadings
<b>Conformity (CR= 0.81; AVE= 0.52)</b>	
Real effort was made to reproduce sites/events / products according to the history.	0.69**
The destination has its own established heritage.	0.68**
I could verify the exactitude of sites/events/products I discovered in the destination.	0.74**
Overall, I would say I got a sense of the history and legends at this destination.	0.75**
<b>Realness (CR= 0.79 AVE= 0.56)</b>	
I felt my experience of the destination was historically accurate.	0.83**
I felt connected with human history and civilization.	0.77**
While in the destination, I reenacted with the cultural traditions of the destination.	0.74**
<b>Transformation (CR= 0.80; AVE= 0.57)</b>	
I made an effort to learn about the cultural traditions of the destination.	0.72**
The experience has made me more knowledgeable.	0.79**
The destination instilled in me a sense of ecological conservation.	0.76**
<b>Interaction Quality (CR= 0.87; AVE= 0.77)</b>	
Interaction quality of the employees at this destination is excellent.	0.92**
The interaction I had with the employees were of a high standard.	0.83**
<b>Physical Environment Quality (CR= 0.83; AVE= 0.71)</b>	
I believe that the physical environment at this destination is excellent.	0.86**
The Physical environment of this destination is of high Standard.	0.82**
<b>Outcome Quality (CR= 0.76; AVE= 0.62)</b>	
I feel good about what the destination provides to the visitors.	0.77**
I always have an excellent experience when visiting this destination.	0.80**

<b>Access Quality (CR= 0.83; AVE= 0.71)</b> It is convenient to reach and explore different areas of the destination as visitors. I feel free to explore, and there are no restrictions to access different areas of the destination	0.86** 0.83**
<b>Tourist Engagement (CR= 0.87; AVE= 0.54)</b> I am enthusiastic towards this destination. I am passionate about this destination. I have a sense of belonging to this destination. When dealing with this destination, I am deeply involved. When interacting with this destination, I concentrate entirely on it. When involved with this destination, my mind is focused on what is happening.	0.62** 0.77** 0.79** 0.79** 0.73** 0.70**
<b>Destination Loyalty (CR= 0.81; AVE= 0.57)</b> I will recommend this destination to others. I will say positive things about this destination. I will share information about this destination with my family and friends I will revisit this destination.	0.73** 0.83** 0.83** 0.81**

Notes. \*\*  $p < 0.05$

The researchers then evaluated the first-order measurement model validity. The convergent validity is shown in Table 1, measured through average AVE values of each measure, which were greater than 0.5 and ranged from 0.52 to 0.71. (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The discriminant validity of the components was then assessed utilizing Fornell & Larcker (1981) criterion. Table 2 summarizes that each construct's square root value was higher than its correlation coefficients with other components. Discriminant validity was thus established (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**Table 2: Reliability & Validity**

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Conformity	<b>0.72</b>								
2. Realness	0.55	<b>0.75</b>							
3. Transformation	0.45	0.36	<b>0.76</b>						
4. Interaction Quality	0.32	0.37	0.26	<b>0.87</b>					
5. Physical Environment Quality	0.45	0.46	0.37	0.47	<b>0.84</b>				
6. Outcome Quality	0.25	0.22	0.14	0.22	0.21	<b>0.79</b>			
7. Access Quality	0.47	0.40	0.36	0.32	0.45	0.25	<b>0.84</b>		
8. Tourist Engagement	0.39	0.74	0.47	0.35	0.37	0.20	0.39	<b>0.74</b>	
9. Destination Loyalty	0.45	0.42	0.52	0.29	0.42	0.16	0.45	0.48	<b>0.80</b>

Notes. All inter-construct correlations are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Diagonal bold values represent the square root of the average variance extracted.

#### 4.2.2. Structural Model Analysis

For the structural model assessment, the researchers tested the proposed hypotheses using path analysis. The two-stage process (Wetzels et al., 2009) was followed, and the score of the first-order constructs as observed variables were used to assess the second-order latent variables. Bootstrapping technique with a resample of 5000 was applied. The  $R^2$  value of tourist engagement and destination loyalty were 0.54 and 0.65, respectively, indicating that the model explained above 50% of the change in the dependent variables. The  $Q^2$  values of experience authenticity, experience quality and tourist engagement were 0.63, 0.41 and 0.30, respectively. This indicates that the relationship proposed in the model has satisfactory predictive relevance (Chin, 1998), showing the significance of explanatory variables (Experience authenticity, experience quality and tourist engagement) in explaining tourist loyalty toward the destination. Next, the significance of hypothesized relationships among the study variables was assessed using standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) and  $t$  values.

First, the effects of experience authenticity and experience quality on tourist engagement were tested. Table 3 presents the standardized path coefficients between experience authenticity and tourist engagement  $\beta = 0.52$  ( $t = 15.55$ ), indicating that experience authenticity significantly and positively influences tourist engagement. This outcome is consistent with earlier studies that looked at the impact of authenticity on customer engagement. Customers who consider an experience genuine and truthful are more willing to work with the business to create value (Nadeem, Juntunen, Shirazi, & Hajli, 2020; Stepchenkova & Park, 2021). As a result, the destinations recreate nostalgic landscapes for tourists. When experiences are rooted in the very essence of the destination culture and natural environment, tourists find them unique and original and are attracted and get involved in these experiences (Lynch & Sheldon, 2020).

Similarly, the path coefficient between experience quality and tourist engagement  $\beta = 0.15$  ( $t = 3.64$ ) indicates that experience quality directly and significantly affects tourist engagement. Thus,  $H_2$  was supported. The finding agrees with previous research investigating the impact of experience quality on tourist engagement. Customers/ tourists are facilitated to engage in the destination experiences through quality services and physical atmosphere, which intern affect their behavior towards the destination (He et al., 2021; Nyadzayo et al., 2020). Experience quality is the tourist's perception of service excellence at a destination, and these services facilitate tourists during their stay at the destinations and enhance their engagement in the touristic experiences (Teng, 2021). However, the relatively weak relationship of experience quality with tourist engagement ( $\beta = 0.15$ ) as compared to the impact of experience authenticity ( $\beta = 0.52$ ) indicates that experience quality is not the prime reason for destination visit, and these are just facilitation factors for the actual desired (Extraordinary) experiences to occur.

The proposed association between tourist engagement and destination loyalty ( $H_3$ ) was supported by the standardized path coefficient of the relationship  $\beta = 0.48$  ( $t = 10.94$ ). The

result is in congruence with recent studies that have found that tourists with high destination engagement during their experience tend to be more loyal to it (Chen et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Tourist engagement represents the tourists' cognitive and emotional involvement in the destination experiences. Tourist engagement increases the level of contact between the tourist and the destinations, and they get more out of their experience. Consequently, engaged tourists form favorable attitudes and behavior towards these destinations. Destination loyalty is, therefore, positively affected by tourist engagement.

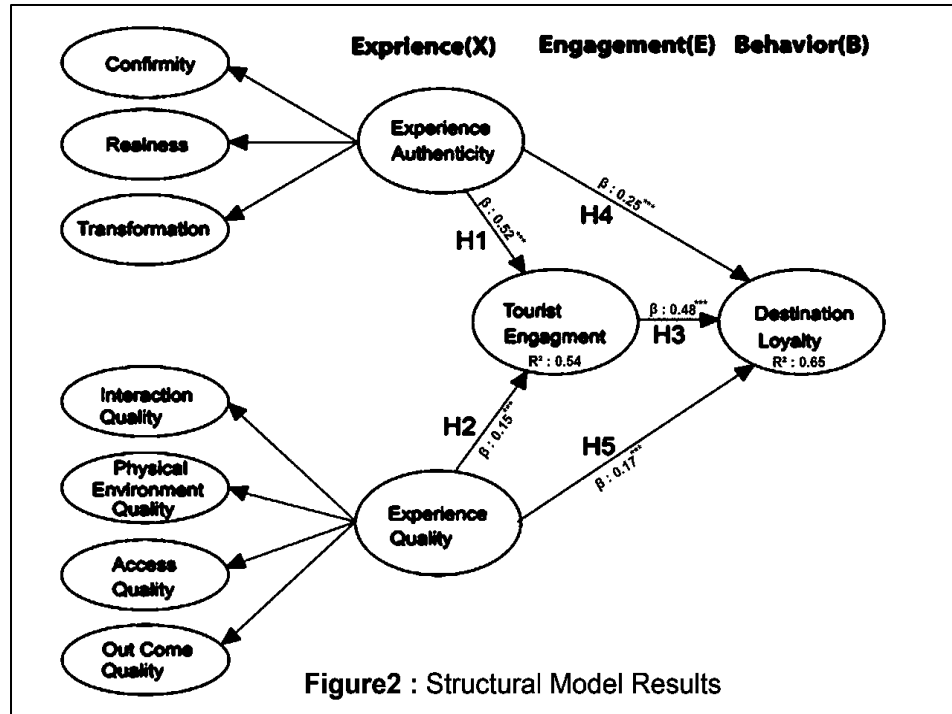
The value of the standardized path coefficients between experience authenticity and destination loyalty  $\beta = 0.25$  ( $t = 8.31$ ) indicates that experience authenticity significantly influences destination loyalty. Thus, Hypothesis  $H_4$  was supported. This outcome supports the previous findings that investigated the impact of destination authenticity on the loyalty intentions of tourists (Chen & Lee, 2021; Yin & Dai, 2021). As the number of destinations increases, the tourist finds their destination experiences as only the serial reproduction of the same experiences. Tourist destinations appear to be similar places with no unique appeal or attraction. Authentic experiences, on the other hand, distinguish a destination as a unique place and provides reasons for revisiting and recommendation to others (Cong, Zhang, & Chen, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). The existential authenticity offered by the destination helps tourists in self-transformation, which affects their desire to stay longer and visit again. The authenticity reflected in destination experiences thus affects tourist loyalty toward the destination.

The standardized path coefficient between experience quality and destination loyalty  $\beta = 0.17$  ( $t = 3.30$ ) indicated that experience quality has a significant and direct impact on destination loyalty. Thus,  $H_5$  was sustained. The finding is similar to the past research that investigated the impact of destination experiences on tourist loyalty (Hung et al., 2021; Zhang & Walsh, 2021). The experience of tourists with the services, like transport, lodging, food, and the ease of access to the attractions facilitate them to enjoy their touristic experiences without much ado and increase their loyalty towards these destinations. Table 3 displays the structural model's outcomes.

**Table 3: Results of Hypothesis**

Hypothesis	Relationships			$\beta$	t-value	P-value	Decision
H <sub>1</sub> :	Experience Authenticity	➡	Tourist Engagement	0.52	15.55	0.001	Supported
H <sub>2</sub> :	Experience Quality	➡	Tourist Engagement	0.15	3.64	0.001	Supported
H <sub>3</sub> :	Tourist Engagement	➡	Destination Loyalty	0.48	10.94	0.001	Supported
H <sub>4</sub> :	Experience Authenticity	➡	Destination Loyalty	0.25	8.31	0.001	Supported
H <sub>5</sub> :	Experience Quality	➡	Destination Loyalty	0.17	3.30	0.001	Supported

The study's results indicate the importance of the authenticity of the experiences for the visitors of Swat and Chitral, making the experience unique and self-relevant, affecting their engagement and future relationships with the destination. Perception or experience of authenticity is one of the important elements of co-creation experiences that influence tourist attitudes and behavior towards the destination (Glenn & Yimin, 2019). The experiences that confirm the historic and natural environment of the destinations represent valuable assets that attract tourists and affect their loyalty toward the destination. Similarly, the positive and significant influence of experience quality also emerged as a necessary condition for tourist engagement and destination loyalty. This implies that the service elements, such as the physical/social service environment and ease of access to the destination, are necessary conditions for enabling tourist engagement and affect tourist loyalty towards the destinations. As various actors like destination management provide these experiences, service providers, residents and the environment and tourist themselves, co-cocreation (experience) theory represent the appropriate lens to coordinate the resources of these stakeholders for optimal tourist experience creation (Cao et al., 2023). The structural model results of the direct relationship are depicted in figure2 below.



#### 4.2.3. Results of Mediation

After assessing the direct relationships, the researchers tested the mediation effect of tourist engagement between the destination experience elements and destination loyalty. Bootstrapping (5000 resamples) was used to get the path coefficients, standard errors, and t-values of indirect effects, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The mediation impact of tourist engagement between experience authenticity and destination loyalty ( $H_6$ ) was validated. Therefore, the indirect effect of experience authenticity on destination loyalty ( $t = 7.41$ ) was significant. Tourist engagement partially mediates the association between experience authenticity and destination loyalty since the direct effect of experience authenticity on destination loyalty ( $H_4$ ) was also supported. The significant support for the  $H_7$  was shown by the indirect impact of experience quality on destination loyalty ( $t = 3.45$ ). Tourist engagement is a partial mediator in the association between experience quality and destination loyalty because the direct relationship between experience quality and destination loyalty ( $H_5$ ) was also supported. The results are depicted in Table 4.

**Table 4: Results of Mediation Analysis**

Hypothesis	Indirect effect Path					$\beta$	t-values	P-Values
H <sub>6</sub> :	Experience Authenticity	➡	Tourist Engagement	➡	Destination Loyalty	0.25	7.41	0.001
H <sub>7</sub> :	Experience Quality	➡	Tourist Engagement	➡	Destination Loyalty	0.17	3.45	0.001

**Note:** Bootstrap Sampling 5000

The significant mediation effect of tourist engagement between destination experience and loyalty depicts that tourists are the co-creators of their experience and affect their positive future behavior toward the destinations. Tourist destinations have evolved from static spaces to interactive places, offering a range of activities to tourists in response to the desire to engage in touristic experiences actively (Chen et al., 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Tourists are influenced to collaborate with the business and co-create value with it when the destination has an authentic image, and are more inclined to interact when they believe what they see is near the truth (Huwae et al., 2020). Therefore, developing authentic experiences can improve customer engagement. On the other hand, customers who do not trust an authentic experience may be hesitant to share their operant resources with the firm (Zhang et al., 2019).

A tourist who is deeply engaged with a destination has a more favorable view of it and is more likely to return and be loyal because he/she gets more of his/her experience (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). Tourists who are fully absorbed in their experiences are, in essence, meeting their special needs and associating the destination with their selves, which improves their loyalty (Islam et al., 2017). Therefore, authentic experiences increase tourist engagement in the touristic experience, affecting their loyalty to the destinations. Similarly, experience quality facilitates tourists to engage in tourist activities and increases their engagement, which enhances their loyalty to the destination (Suhartanto et al., 2021).

## 5. Implications

The study conceptualized and empirically tested a destination loyalty model by incorporating experience authenticity, experience quality, tourist engagement and destination loyalty. It was found that experience authenticity and experience quality are the antecedents of tourist engagement and destination loyalty, and tourist engagement mediates the relationships between destination experience elements and destination loyalty. The study has important theoretical and practical implications.

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

The current study distinguished between extraordinary and ordinary experiences represented by destination authenticity and experience quality and investigated their impact on tourist attitudes and behavior. It enhances our understanding of experiential marketing in tourism. An authentic experience significantly and positively affects the engagement of



tourists. Despite the tourist industry's recognition of the value of authenticity, authenticity research in the destination context is uncommon (Chen et al., 2022). The current study found that experience authenticity positively impacted tourist engagement and destination loyalty. The ordinary experiences, on the other hand, are related to the tourist facilitation to enjoy extraordinary experiences. Although these are not the primary reason for the visit to the destination, these can be treated as hygiene factors essential for extraordinary experiences.

Furthermore, the study results show that the relationship between destination experience and destination loyalty is mediated by engagement. Thus, it adds to our understating of value co-creation theory. Tourist destinations should be understood as the experience creation platforms or experiences that attract and facilitate tourist experience creation. The mediation effect of tourist engagement confirms the tourist's role as co-creators of experience value. Previous research has found that experience authenticity (Fu, 2019) and experience quality (Moon & Armstrong, 2020; Wu & Gao, 2019) are significant predictors of destination loyalty, but these studies ignored the mediation effect of tourist engagement. This study's findings show that tourist engagement links experience authenticity with destination loyalty and experience quality with destination loyalty. The study emphasizes the significance of tourist engagement in fostering tourist loyalty toward destinations.

Third, a theoretical network was validated connecting experience authenticity, experience quality, tourist engagement and destination loyalty which can be characterized as the "Experience-Engagement-Behavior (XEB) " logic chain. It is consistent with the engagement theory that defines tourist engagement as a mental state stimulated by co-creative experiences that affect future customer relationships with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Minkiewicz et al., 2014).

### *5.2 Practical Implications*

This study analyzed the separate impact of ordinary and extraordinary experiences represented in this study by experience authenticity and experience quality on destination loyalty. According to the findings, experience authenticity and experience quality produce positive tourist-related outcomes like tourist engagement and destination loyalty. It will help destination management organizations (DMOs), hospitality managers, and other auxiliary service providers better allocate resources and manage their businesses.

Extraordinary experiences, also known as peak experiences or flow experiences, are the main reason most tourists visit tourist destinations because these provide an environment and opportunities to realize their dreams and actualize their true potential (Richardson & Insch, 2021). Destination management organizations (DMOs) should explore their destinations' unique characteristics and potential and realize this potential by offering extraordinary experiences rooted in the DNA of their destinations. These authentic experiences give tourist destinations unique identities and differentiate them from other

destinations. Ordinary experiences, although not the primary reason for the tourist's engagement with the destination, are indispensable for the occurrence of extraordinary experiences. Destination management organizations (DMOs) must integrate strategies relating to experience authenticity and experience quality to increase tourist loyalty. Managers need to focus more on the authenticity of destination brands if the goal of the destination is to increase destination loyalty. It would be helpful to spend more resources on unique tourist attractions like culture and heritage, flora and fauna, event and activities and assisting tourists in self-development and transformation.

The study found that tourist engagement is an essential link in the association between experience authenticity, experience quality, and loyalty. Experience occurs when tourists interact with the objects and activities of the destination, and tourist engagement is crucial for a memorable experience. Destination management organizations must consider the value of tourist engagement in positive experience creation and destination loyalty formation. Managers can, for example, use social networks to engage visitors, such as a brand community, allowing them to transcend time and geography. This encourages tourists to return and helps promote the destination through positive word of mouth.

The study was conducted in the two districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province (Swat and Chitral) in Pakistan, where the government plans to develop four integrated tourism zones (ITZ). This study's practical ramifications are critical for managing these projects. First, these destinations should be developed based on a theme unique to the particular destination. For instance, the tourism zone being developed in Chitral may use the unique culture of "Kalash" as a theme to guide all the developments like historic trails, lodging, culinary experiences, festivals and markets. Second, these destinations should have quality services and easy access to facilitate international tourists to reach and stay there. Third, the common theme of the destination should be conveyed to all the stakeholders through internal marketing. Fourth, national and international promotional campaigns should be developed around this common theme and executed on mainstream and social media.

### *5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions*

As with other studies, this study also has some limitations that must be considered before adopting the study results or recommendations. First, the survey respondents included national and foreign tourists with different socio-cultural backgrounds, which may have influenced their expectations and experience of the destination. Future studies should verify these effects by studying the behavior of domestic vs. foreign tourists.

Second, this study investigated the role of tourist engagement in mediating the relationships between experience authenticity, experience quality, and destination loyalty, but other mediating or moderating variables, such as brand love or brand experience, may also be necessary. These constructs could be investigated as mediators or moderators in future research.

Third, this study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to analyze the relationship among important variables relating to the tourist experience and the resulting destination loyalty. However, as there may be more contact points at tourist destinations relating to tourist experience. Future researchers are encouraged to use mixed methods and first identify relevant experience touch points through interviewing the tourists and then quantify the relationships of these experience dimensions with destination loyalty.

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