

PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY AND ASSOCIATED TOURIST BEHAVIORS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN SLOW TOURISM AND LEISURE TOURISM IN BUCOVINA

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ABSTRACT. – **Perceived Authenticity and Associated Tourist Behaviors: A Comparative Study Between Slow Tourism and Leisure Tourism in Bucovina.** Contemporary destination management frequently relies on a transactional model, assuming that high customer satisfaction automatically triggers proactive responsible behaviors. This research challenges this foundational premise by examining how dimensions of perceived authenticity dictate tourist outcomes across two polarizing experiential profiles in Bucovina, Romania: active immersion on the Via Transilvanica trail and passive recreation in traditional leisure resorts. Analyzing data from 80 respondents through a sequential MANOVA and PLS-SEM approach, the study uncovers a distinct decoupling of tourist responsibility from commercial satisfaction. While existential and objective authenticity directly enhance satisfaction, responsible behavior is uniquely driven by existential and constructive dimensions. Strikingly, postmodern authenticity serves as a significant deterrent to responsible intentions, proving that high commodification transforms visitors into detached spectators who view the territory as a disposable product. Furthermore, satisfaction fails to mediate any structural paths, illustrating that civic engagement is not a reciprocal exchange for comfort but a direct consequence of intrinsic, self-reflective connections with the landscape. The study provides critical strategic implications for regional policymakers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), arguing that regional sustainability must be engineered through transformational experiential design rather than standard satisfaction metrics.

Keywords: *perceived authenticity, Via Transilvanica, satisfaction, slow tourism, responsible behavior, Bucovina.*

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INTRODUCTION

As a medium through which people experience geographical and cultural environments different from their daily lives, tourism has transcended the boundaries of mere service provision, transforming into an active search for meaning and memorable experiences (Polo-Peña et al., 2025; Kebete, 2021; Vistad et al., 2020). In this context, authenticity has become the central attribute of tourism destination development and promotion, being considered an essential value that differentiates a space in a competitive global market (Preda et al., 2025). The understanding of this concept has evolved significantly in recent decades; researchers' focus has shifted from a strictly object-oriented approach – where physical originality was paramount – to a subject-centered approach, where the tourist's inner state and interaction with the environment define the experience (Shang et al., 2020). This paradigm becomes particularly relevant when analyzing destinations with contrasting profiles (Andrade-Suárez et al., 2025). A prime example is the geographical area of Bucovina, Romania, which simultaneously offers infrastructure for classic, comfort-oriented tourism, alongside endurance routes specific to slow travel, such as Via Transilvanica, where the primary motivation is physical effort and immersion.

Measuring the success of a destination is no longer limited exclusively to the intention to revisit; it involves the analysis of two fundamental outcome variables: tourist satisfaction and responsible behavior. Satisfaction represents the cognitive and emotional evaluation an individual makes following tourism consumption, serving as a baseline indicator of industry performance (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Oliver, 1997). However, to ensure the long-term sustainability of host communities, an even more critical indicator is responsible behavior, manifested through concrete actions to protect the natural environment and support the local economy (Wei & Zhang, 2023; J. Yang et al., 2021). Previous studies have demonstrated that perceived authenticity is an essential factor influencing these outcomes (L. Yang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the relationship between the different facets of authenticity (objective, constructive, existential, and postmodern) and tourists' behavioral responses is not always linear or consistent, especially when moderating factors such as destination typology and initial travel motivation intervene (Polo-Peña et al., 2025; Douglas et al., 2024).

In analyzing the relationship between tourist perception and subsequent actions, the literature often proposes mediation models wherein an authentic experience generates a high level of satisfaction, which in turn automatically leads to responsible behavior (Yüksel et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). However, this assumption has created a series of gaps in understanding contemporary tourist behavior, often ignoring the phenomenon known as the attitude-

behavior gap. For instance, a high level of existential authenticity – the feeling of self-discovery resulting from physical effort on an endurance trail – can generate maximum personal satisfaction, yet it does not guarantee the initiation of actions to protect the destination. The external behavioral response seems to be triggered rather by the evaluation of how the destination preserves its own cultural and traditional identity, a cognitive process intrinsically linked to constructive authenticity (Andrade-Suárez et al., 2025; C. Wang et al., 2021). The exact dynamics of these dual paths of influence remain insufficiently explored in the literature.

Therefore, the present study aims to deepen the theoretical and practical role of authenticity in shaping tourist satisfaction and responsibility. The primary objective is to investigate the interaction between destination typology and travel motivation, analyzing their impact on three major constructs: perceived authenticity, satisfaction level, and intention toward responsible behavior. Utilizing a quantitative design and a two-step analytical approach, the research will evaluate the differences between tourist groups and test the structural causal relationships. This paper seeks to provide a clarified theoretical foundation regarding tourists' decision-making pathways and to equip public administrations and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) with validated tools for creating development strategies that align tourism promotion with the actual psychological mechanisms of visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of scientific thought in tourism geography has marked a significant transition from traditional approaches, focused on resource inventorying and the description of material infrastructure (Jafari, 2016; Cohen & Cohen, 2012), toward the dynamic analysis of territorial systems and lived space. From this modern perspective, the destination becomes an area where the interaction between the local community, heritage, and the visitor generates territorial meaning and value (Chen, 2025; Sigala et al., 2025; Agapito & Sigala, 2024; Costa et al., 2013).

The national geographical school has demonstrated that the long-term viability of any space depends on the balance between economic development and the preservation of landscape identity (Ciangă & Oprea, 2018; Ciangă & Dezsi, 2007). The success of a regional strategy is dictated by the ability to capitalize on unique elements without altering their substance (Ielenicz & Comănescu, 2013; P. Cocean & Dezsi, 2009; Benedek & Dezsi, 2006), since generic developments produce a fracture in the visitor's perception (Matei et al., 2018;

R. Cocean et al., 2014). Therefore, the boundary between slow tourism and leisure tourism illustrates how the design of a spatial experience can either protect or degrade an area.

Tourist motivation represents the fundamental driving force that determines individuals to engage in travel (Phori et al., 2025; Yousaf et al., 2018). The push-and-pull factors theory distinguishes internal forces from external ones related to destination attributes (Crompton, 1979; Gupta et al., 2025; Hamdy et al., 2023; Putra & Rakhman, 2024), which together shape travel behavior (Duong et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025). At a psychological level, choices are divided into two main directions: hedonic and eudaimonic orientations (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026).

The hedonic tourist pursues subjective happiness, comfort, and relaxation through experiences involving minimal physical or cognitive effort, favoring safe destinations and modern facilities (Huang et al., 2024). This approach focuses on short-term well-being, preferring to remain within a comfort zone and avoiding the unpolished or uncomfortable realities of the visited space (L. He & Timothy, 2024), traits that are specific to classic leisure tourism (Putra & Rakhman, 2024). By contrast, the eudaimonic tourist is motivated by personal development, self-discovery, and deep involvement (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026). Travel becomes a quest for existential meaning that requires autonomy and overcoming challenges (Gupta et al., 2025). These travelers abandon comfort for a profound connection with the natural and cultural environment (L. He & Timothy, 2024), using effort and immersion as essential tools for self-realization (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026; Gupta et al., 2025).

Authenticity represents a central pillar in tourism research, evolving from the analysis of staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) toward the understanding of a multifaceted concept (Ning, 2017; Park et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). From an epistemological standpoint, this construct is classified into four fundamental dimensions (Lin & Liu, 2018; Tian et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2023):

- i.* Objective authenticity: focuses on the verifiable originality of the object according to absolute standards (Zhou et al., 2022), considering an element authentic only if it remains unaltered and identical to its original historical form (Zhang et al., 2021).
- ii.* Constructive authenticity: argues that authenticity is a flexible, negotiated, and socially constructed concept (Almeida & Leal, 2024), representing the subjective projection of expectations and beliefs that the tourist holds regarding the attraction (Park et al., 2019).
- iii.* Existential authenticity: shifts attention from the object to the subject, referring to a state activated by participation in activities (Zhang et al.,

2021). Psychologically, it describes the liberation from daily constraints and the reclaiming of the authentic self through freedom and personal fulfillment (Yi et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2022).

- iv. Postmodern authenticity: deconstructs the boundaries between the real and the fake, justifying simulated attractions and hyperreality (Yi et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2023). The historical origin becomes secondary to an experience that corresponds strictly to the consumer's desires (Almeida & Leal, 2024; Zhang et al., 2019).

Tourist satisfaction represents a complex psychological state of personal fulfillment in relation to initial expectations (Oliver, 1997). Based on a cognitive-affective model, the rational evaluation of infrastructure blends organically with the emotional response and the attachment developed toward the place (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Yüksel et al., 2010). An experience perceived as authentic acts as a trigger for external behavioral intentions oriented toward destination protection (S. Wang et al., 2024; L. Yang et al., 2023). Responsible tourist behavior includes the environmental dimension, characterized by proactive conservation actions in contact with unaltered resources (Wei & Zhang, 2023), and the socio-economic dimension, which implies respecting cultural norms and supporting the economy of the hosts (X. He et al., 2018; L. Yang et al., 2023).

The dominant paradigm in destination management has traditionally relied on a transactional model, assuming that providing comfort and original physical attractions automatically generates satisfaction and responsible behavior (X. He et al., 2018; Zhao & Weng, 2024). The present endeavor identifies a triple research gap in the specialized literature:

- Lack of comparative analysis between active immersion and passive tourism. Most studies evaluate perception within a single environment, leaving a deficit of direct comparative research between an endurance route and a classic, facility-based leisure destination.
- Overestimation of satisfaction as a mediator of responsibility. Theoretical models often force satisfaction into the role of a mediator (S. Wang et al., 2024). A critical investigation is required to determine whether civic attitude depends on accommodation conditions or is decoupled from this factor.
- Neglecting existential authenticity as a primary predictive factor. There are few empirical validations of the impact of inner transformation on sustainability. The present study tests the hypothesis that self-discovery facilitated by effort outranks tangible elements in generating responsible tourist behavior.

By addressing these limitations, the research proposes a paradigm shift: moving the center of gravity from destination externalities to the internal processes of the visitor.

Research hypothesis

Destination attributes and internal motivation merge, cohesively shaping the tourist experience (Gupta et al., 2025). Unaltered destinations attract challenge seekers, whereas commercial environments attract comfort-oriented tourists (L. He & Timothy, 2024), a polarization that dictates the type of perceived authenticity. Endurance tourism (eudaimonic) uses physical effort for self-discovery (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026). Demanding environments facilitate existential authenticity and the appreciation of objective authenticity (Shang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2022), as the tourist connects with the true self by overcoming limits (Vistad et al., 2020). At the opposite pole, leisure tourism (hedonic) aims for relaxation. The preference for developed environments favors constructive and postmodern authenticity (Zhang et al., 2021), where absolute originality becomes secondary to a comfortable symbolic experience (Park et al., 2019).

H1 (The effect of the tourist experience profile): The tourist experience profile (indicated by destination or motivation) determines significant differences in the perception of authenticity dimensions.

H1a (The effect of the destination): Tourists who traveled the Via Transilvanica route will report a significantly higher score for objective and existential authenticity, while those who chose a classic experience in the Bucovina resorts will report significantly higher scores for postmodern authenticity.

H1b (The effect of motivation): Tourists whose primary motivation was Challenge will report higher scores for existential and objective authenticity, whereas those whose primary motivation was Comfort will report higher scores for postmodern authenticity.

The perception of authenticity is a precursor to well-being; the connection with the environment exponentially increases the overall evaluation of the trip (L. Yang et al., 2023). Achieving existential and objective authenticity generates long-term satisfaction (Park et al., 2019).

H2 (Direct effect on satisfaction): The dimensions of authenticity directly and positively influence overall tourist satisfaction, with existential authenticity having the strongest predictive effect.

Authentic experiences stimulate proactive behaviors; attachment to place identity translates into protecting the ecosystem and supporting the local community (Wei & Zhang, 2023). The perceived cultural and natural value dictates the assumed responsibility (L. Yang et al., 2023).

H3 (Direct effect on responsibility): Perceived authenticity has a direct and positive effect on the intention to adopt environmentally and socio-economically responsible tourist behavior.

Theoretically, satisfaction is the main driver of loyalty; the fulfillment of comfort expectations is associated with the willingness to contribute to the destination's well-being, acting as a reciprocal transaction (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Yüksel et al., 2010).

H4 (Satisfaction-Responsibility relationship): The level of tourist satisfaction directly and positively influences responsible behavior.

Often, the literature proposes indirect paths: an authentic experience generates satisfaction, which in turn mediates the adoption of responsible behavior (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2021). Testing this mediation verifies whether environmental protection depends exclusively on achieving tourist comfort.

H5 (The mediation effect): Tourist satisfaction acts as a full mediator between perceived authenticity and the intention to adopt responsible tourist behavior.

METHODOLOGY

For data analysis, a two-step approach was adopted. In the first stage, group differences based on destination and motivation were tested using MANOVA. In the second stage, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the structural causal relationships among authenticity, satisfaction, and responsible behavior.

Research site

The research was conducted in two areas with distinct tourism profiles, intentionally selected to reflect the contrast between slow tourism and leisure tourism. The first study setting is represented by the long-distance trail Via

Transilvanica, Bucovina section (a 136-km route between the localities of Putna and Poiana Negri, Suceava County, Romania), an environment that demands physical endurance and fosters a slow immersion into the natural and cultural landscape (Florea, 2024; Bojan, 2022; Țichindelean et al., 2022). The second setting comprises the resorts within the Bucovina region – with which Suceava County is frequently identified – established destinations for leisure tourism characterized by a developed infrastructure oriented toward facilities and comfort. This geographical duality provides an ideal basis for a direct evaluation of how environmental attributes influence tourist perception.

Research design

The research architecture relies on a cross-sectional quantitative design structured in two sequential stages (Figure 1). The first stage utilizes multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to evaluate how destination typology and travel motivation alter the perception of authenticity (Li, 2012). The specialized literature confirms the utility of MANOVA in segmenting tourist profiles, having been successfully applied to isolate perceptions of heritage and cultural events (Brida et al., 2012; Weng et al., 2020), evaluate expectation gaps in rural environments (C. Wang et al., 2021), and behaviorally differentiate visitors (Gannon et al., 2022). To evaluate differences between asymmetric groups, Pillai's Trace was selected, recognized for its conservative robustness against Type I errors when the assumptions of homogeneity of covariances are violated (Li, 2012; Mehmetoglu et al., 2010).

In the second stage, variance-based Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was implemented to test the causal and mediation pathways among the tourist's experiences, satisfaction level, and intention toward responsible behavior (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022). The predictive capacity of this algorithm is extensively demonstrated in validating authenticity as a mediator (Supriono et al., 2023), isolating the impact on tourist satisfaction (Muskat et al., 2019), and evaluating behavioral intentions in heritage destinations (Bassiony & Chahine, 2024; Su & Rahman, 2026), including domestic analytical contexts (Muntean et al., 2023).

An inherent limitation of the study is the final sample size ($N = 80$). Since the investigation of emergent phenomena such as slow tourism renders traditional demographic sampling restrictive, the statistical stability of the model was ensured by applying the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, which guarantees the attainment of robust confidence intervals (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, the sample volume complies with the "ten times rule", exceeding the minimum threshold required for the simultaneous testing of the

five major structural relationships in the proposed theoretical model (Bassiony & Chahine, 2024; Muntean et al., 2023; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Su & Rahman, 2026; Taherdoost, 2016). MANOVA analyses were run in the open-source statistical environment JASP (v. 0.95.4), and PLS-SEM testing was conducted using the SmartPLS 4 software suite.

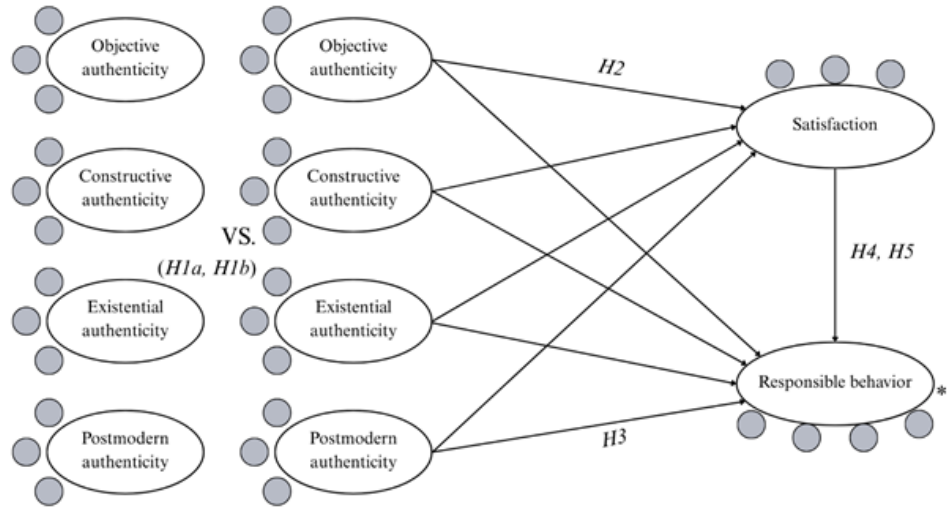


Fig. 1. Conceptual model architecture and proposed causal pathways.
Source: the author

Data collection

Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, utilizing 7-point Likert scales. The instrument, originally developed by the author by operationalizing concepts from the literature, employs gatekeeper questions to exclusively select visitors of the two analyzed destinations. The sampling was non-probabilistic, combining convenience and snowball techniques via online tourism communities, resulting in a final sample of 80 respondents.

Prior to full dissemination, the instrument was validated through a pilot study (N = 46) aimed at assessing the clarity of the items and completion time. The internal consistency analysis confirmed the robustness of the questionnaire, with most Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the optimal 0.70 threshold. Constructs falling below this level (such as responsible behavior) were subsequently identified and refined (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Furthermore,

exploratory statistical tests (independent T-tests and simple linear regression) run on the preliminary data revealed essential behavioral patterns, providing the practical foundation for finalizing the hypotheses of the structural model.

ANALYSIS

Socio-demographic characteristics

The demographic analysis of the 80 validated respondents indicated a distribution of 53.75% females and 46.25% males, primarily concentrated in the 18–25 (37.5%) and 26–35 (23.75%) age brackets. The high educational profile (76.25% holding higher education degrees) suggested an audience capable of critically evaluating nuanced concepts regarding the tourist experience, thereby minimizing the risk of superficial responses.

Strict participant filtering led to a polarized and natural division of the dataset: 36 respondents (45%) formed the immersion and endurance group (Via Transilvanica), while 44 tourists (55%) comprised the leisure and comfort group (classic Bucovina resorts). Motivational segmentation yielded a similar distribution, with 39 participants driven by 'Challenge' and 41 by 'Comfort'. This clear distribution attested to the quality of the data collection process and confirmed the viability of the groups for the subsequent MANOVA analyses and structural equation testing (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018; Taherdoost, 2016).

Measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated on the final sample through reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity analyses. Following the pilot study, the instrument was refined by removing a low-loading item from the 'Responsible Behavior' construct. The results shown in Table 1 indicate optimal internal consistency: Cronbach's Alpha (0.724-0.856) and Composite Reliability (0.792-0.912) values comfortably exceed the 0.70 threshold. Convergent validity is confirmed, with all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpassing the 0.50 limit (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Taherdoost, 2016). Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) criterion (Table 2). Most values fall below the strict 0.85 threshold, with a single exception (0.874 for the Satisfaction – Existential Authenticity relationship). However, this respects the 0.90 tolerance limit accepted for conceptually proximal constructs (Ab Hamid et al., 2017; Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018), thus ensuring a valid data framework for hypothesis testing.

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity analysis

	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
Constructive authenticity	0.737	0.766	0.849	0.653
Existential authenticity	0.856	0.858	0.912	0.776
Objective authenticity	0.771	0.934	0.851	0.659
Postmodern authenticity	0.730	0.394	0.792	0.566
RB	0.724	0.734	0.831	0.555
Satisfaction	0.802	0.831	0.884	0.720

*Note: CR=Composite Reliability; AVE=Average Variance Extracted; RB=Responsible Behavior
Source: the author

Table 2. Discriminant validity matrix (HTMT criterion)

	Constructive authenticity	Existential authenticity	Objective authenticity	Postmodern authenticity	RB	Satisfaction
Constructive authenticity						
Existential authenticity	0.627					
Objective authenticity	0.682	0.430				
Postmodern authenticity	0.330	0.119	0.274			
RB	0.727	0.805	0.388	0.202		
Satisfaction	0.649	0.874	0.610	0.291	0.710	

Source: the author

Group differences analysis

Prior to evaluating the global differences between groups, the fulfillment of the mathematical assumptions required for running the MANOVA algorithm was examined. Box's M test indicated a deviation from the assumption of

homogeneity of covariance matrices, a natural and anticipated consequence of the sample size asymmetry between the two compared groups. To neutralize this technical limitation inherent to field studies and guarantee the robustness of the final results, it was decided to report the differences exclusively via Pillai's Trace statistic, an indicator recognized for its resilience to this type of violation. Additionally, the evaluation of individual variances through Levene's test confirmed sufficient structural stability to allow the continuation and validation of the inferential investigation.

To test whether the tourism destination profile influences the level of perceived authenticity, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The omnibus test (Table 3) indicated a statistically significant overall difference between the Via Transilvanica group and the Bucovina group at the global authenticity construct level (Pillai's Trace = 0.180, $F(4, 75) = 4.113$, $p = 0.005$). To isolate the source of this overall difference, follow-up univariate ANOVAs were executed for each of the four authenticity dimensions (Table 4). A statistically significant difference was found for Objective Authenticity ($F(1, 78) = 5.443$, $p = 0.022$, $\eta^2 = 0.065$), with Via Transilvanica tourists reporting higher scores compared to those in Bucovina. Similarly, a significant difference was identified for Postmodern Authenticity ($F(1, 78) = 5.353$, $p = 0.023$, $\eta^2 = 0.064$), where tourists in Bucovina recorded higher levels than those on the long-distance route. Regarding Existential Authenticity, the results indicated a marginally significant difference ($F(1, 78) = 3.053$, $p = 0.085$; means of 6.39 vs. 5.97). Constructive Authenticity did not show statistically significant differences between the two tourist groups ($p = 0.226$).

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) – destination impact

	df	Approx F	Pillai Trace	num df	den df	p
Intercept	1	1024.827	0.982	4	75	<0.001
Destination	1	4.113	0.18	4	75	0.005
Residuals	78					

Note. Pillai Trace = Pillai's trace multivariate test statistic; Approx F = approximate F-distribution statistic; df = total degrees of freedom; num df = numerator degrees of freedom; den df = denominator degrees of freedom; p = statistical significance value.

Source: the author

Table 4. Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for authenticity dimensions
in relation to destination

Authenticity dimension	Via Transilvanica			Bucovina			p	F	η^2
	Valid	Mean	SD	Valid	Mean	SD			
Objective	36	5.704	1.032	44	5.167	1.018	0.022	5.443	0.065
Constructive	36	6.046	1.185	44	5.773	0.813	0.226	1.491	0.019
Existential	36	6.398	1.143	44	5.977	1.010	0.085	3.053	0.038
Postmodern	36	3.630	1.595	44	4.371	1.272	0.023	5.353	0.064

Note. F = F-distribution test statistic; p = statistical significance value; η^2 = eta squared effect size.

Source: the author

To test the impact of tourists' internal motivation on the perception of authenticity, a second multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The sample was segmented based on the main purpose of the trip: seeking challenge (N = 39) versus seeking comfort (N = 41). The omnibus test (Table 5) confirmed a statistically significant overall difference between the two motivational profiles at the level of the global authenticity construct (Pillai's Trace = 0.203, $F(4, 75) = 4.766$, $p = 0.002$).

Table 5. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) – motivation impact

	df	Approx F	Pillai Trace	num df	den df	p
Intercept	1	1011.461	0.982	4	75	<0.001
Motivation	1	4.766	0.203	4	75	0.002
Residuals	78					

Source: the author

To identify the specific sources of variation, follow-up univariate ANOVA tests were analyzed (Table 6). A statistically significant difference was found for Existential Authenticity ($F(1, 78) = 6.740$, $p = 0.011$, $\eta^2 = 0.080$), with challenge-motivated tourists reporting higher means (6.47) compared

to comfort-motivated ones (5.87). An inverse relationship was observed for Postmodern Authenticity ($F(1, 78) = 6.199, p = 0.015, \eta^2 = 0.074$), where comfort-oriented tourists recorded a higher level (4.42) compared to challenge-seeking tourists (3.63). In contrast, Objective Authenticity ($p = 0.153$) and Constructive Authenticity ($p = 0.872$) showed no statistically significant differences based on travel motivation.

Table 6. Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for authenticity dimensions in relation to motivation

Authenticity dimension	Challenge			Comfort			p	F	η^2
	Valid	Mean	SD	Valid	Mean	SD			
Objective	39	5.581	1.149	41	5.244	0.937	0.153	2.08	0.026
Constructive	39	5.915	1.154	41	5.878	0.842	0.872	0.026	3.366×10^{-4}
Existential	39	6.479	0.93	41	5.87	1.150	0.011	6.74	0.08
Postmodern	39	3.632	1.574	41	4.423	1.254	0.015	6.199	0.074

Source: the author

Structural model (PLS-SEM Analysis)

Structural model evaluation was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The coefficient of determination (R^2) indicated that the authenticity dimensions explain 54% of the variance in Responsible Behavior and 62.5% of the variance in tourist Satisfaction (Figure 2, Table 7). Path coefficient analysis (Table 8) showed that Existential Authenticity directly and positively influences both Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.595, p < 0.05$) and Responsible Behavior ($\beta = 0.357, p < 0.05$) (Malone et al., 2014). Constructive Authenticity exerted a significant direct positive effect on Responsible Behavior ($\beta = 0.354, p < 0.05$), but did not significantly influence satisfaction. Objective Authenticity positively determined overall Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.240, p < 0.05$), yet had no significant effect on Responsible Behavior ($p = 0.440$) (Park et al., 2019). Postmodern Authenticity recorded a significant negative direct effect on Responsible Behavior ($\beta = -0.253, p = 0.031$) (MacCannell, 2018).

Table 7. Predictive power of the model (after bootstrapping)

	O (R ²)	M	SD	O/STDEV	p
RB	0.54	0.571	0.113	4.79	0
Satisfaction	0.625	0.658	0.066	9.514	0

Note: O=original sample; M=sample mean; SD=standard deviation; |O/STDEV|=t statistics
Source: the author

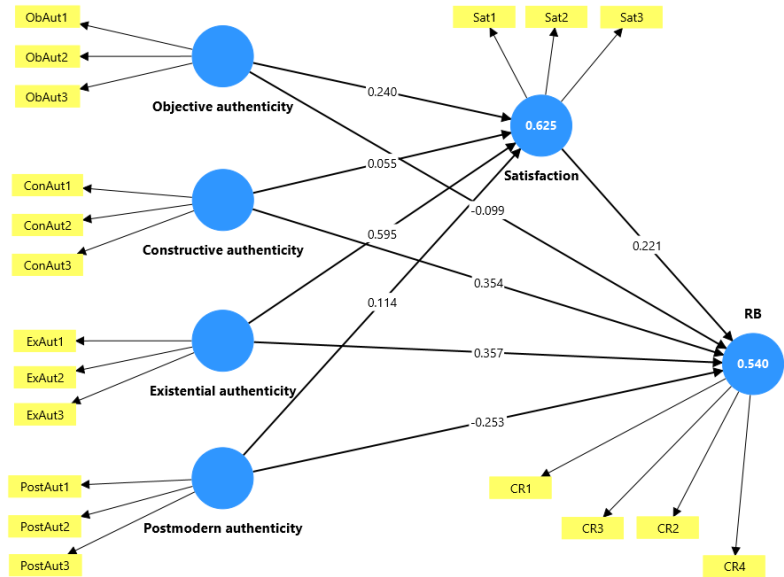


Fig. 2. SmartPLS conceptual model diagram
Source: the author

Indirect path analysis (Table 9) revealed that the direct relationship between Satisfaction and Responsible Behavior was statistically insignificant ($O = 0.221$, $p = 0.319$). All indirect pathways recorded p-values well above the 0.05 threshold, invalidating the mediating role of Satisfaction within the proposed model (Landon et al., 2018).

Table 9. Analysis of specific indirect effects

Path	O	M	SD	O/STDEV	p
Objective auth.-> Satisfaction -> RB	0.053	0.053	0.05	0.979	0.328
Postmodern auth.-> Satisfaction -> RB	0.025	0.021	0.03	0.735	0.462
Constructive auth.-> Satisfaction -> RB	0.012	0.022	0.04	0.308	0.758
Existential auth. -> Satisfaction -> RB	0.132	0.144	0.14	0.968	0.333

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The empirical findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how spatial attributes and psychological drivers interact to shape tourist perceptions, satisfaction, and subsequent environmental and socio-economic responsibilities. By comparing a slow tourism setting (Via Transilvanica) with a traditional leisure destination (Bucovina resorts), this research provides critical insights into contemporary tourist behavior and destination management.

The confirmation of H1 demonstrates that the tourist experience profile – defined by both the geographical setting and initial travel motivation – exerts a significant impact on how authenticity is perceived. Specifically, the validation of H1a and H1b underscores a clear polarization in tourist experiences. The finding that tourists on Via Transilvanica and those driven by "Challenge" report significantly higher levels of objective and existential authenticity aligns with the core tenets of eudaimonic tourism (Abou-Shouk et al., 2026; Gupta et al., 2025). In these demanding, unpolished geographical environments, the physical effort required acts as a catalyst for self-discovery and an unmediated appreciation of the landscape's physical originality (Shang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2022). Tourists willingly abandon modern amenities to connect with their true selves by overcoming personal limits (Vistad et al., 2020).

Conversely, the higher scores for postmodern authenticity reported by tourists in traditional Bucovina resorts and those motivated by "Comfort" confirm that commercialized settings favor simulated or staged experiences (Zhang et al., 2021). For these individuals, absolute historical or physical originality becomes secondary to a comfortable, symbolic experience tailored to their cultural expectations (Park et al., 2019). This polarization validates the push-and-pull framework (Crompton, 1979; L. He & Timothy, 2024), proving that the psychological baggage a tourist carries is just as critical as the physical geography of the destination in determining the nature of the authentic experience.

The empirical results provide partial support for H2, as only specific dimensions of perceived authenticity directly and positively influence overall tourist satisfaction. Crucially, existential authenticity emerged as the strongest and most dominant predictor ($O = 0.595$, $p < 0.05$). This demonstrates that long-term tourist satisfaction is fundamentally rooted in the psychological state of the self – such as the feeling of self-realization and liberation from daily constraints – rather than being solely driven by external destination attributes (L. Yang et al., 2023). Objective authenticity also exerts a significant, though weaker, positive effect on satisfaction ($O = 0.240$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that the verification of genuine, unaltered cultural or natural elements remains a valuable component of the visitor's overall evaluation (Park et al., 2019). However, since constructive and postmodern dimensions did not emerge as significant predictors of satisfaction, the hypothesis is only partially validated. This partial validation contributes to current knowledge by showing that while spatial interaction generates meaning, it requires an internal eudaimonic resonance or a clear objective grounding to actively translate into overall tourist satisfaction.

The evaluation of H3 provides a highly granular and unexpected contribution to sustainable tourism literature. Perceived authenticity does drive environmentally and socio-economically responsible intentions, but its dimensions operate in starkly contrastive ways. Existential authenticity ($O = 0.357$) and constructive authenticity ($O = 0.354$) act as positive drivers. This indicates that when tourists experience personal transformation or actively project symbolic meaning onto a place, they develop a strong attachment that translates into a desire to protect the ecosystem and support the host community (Wei & Zhang, 2023; L. Yang et al., 2023). Interestingly, objective authenticity failed to significantly influence responsible behavior ($p = 0.440$). Merely witnessing an original, historical, or natural attribute does not inherently provoke civic action or protective behaviors.

The most striking revelation is the statistically significant negative path between postmodern authenticity and responsible behavior ($O = -0.253$, $p = 0.031$). This mathematical proof supports the critical arguments of MacCannell (2011), establishing that as a destination is perceived as more staged, commercialized, or "hyper-real," tourists become significantly less willing to act responsibly toward it. High levels of commodification appear to sever the moral connection between the visitor and the territory; the space is treated purely as a commercial product, absolving the consumer of any perceived duty of care.

Perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in the complete rejection of H4 and H5. In contrast to traditional transactional models in destination management – which assume that satisfied tourists automatically become responsible advocates (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008;

Yüksel et al., 2010) – the direct link between satisfaction and responsible behavior was found to be statistically insignificant ($O = 0.221$, $p = 0.319$). Consequently, the hypothesis that satisfaction acts as a mediator (H5) was fully invalidated, as all indirect pathways recorded p-values well above the 0.05 threshold.

Theoretical and practical implications

This empirical evidence dismantles the assumption that pro-environmental or socio-economic responsibility is a reciprocal transaction based on high-quality services or comfort. Tourists do not protect an area because they were highly satisfied with their accommodation or amenities. Instead, responsible behavior is completely decoupled from satisfaction and depends entirely on the direct, intrinsic paths of existential and constructive authenticity (Landon et al., 2018). This presents a vital implication for policy and destination marketing organizations (DMOs): sustainable management strategies cannot rely on customer satisfaction metrics to ensure the protection of regional heritage. Sustainability must be engineered by fostering deep, authentic human connections between the traveler and the local identity.

The theoretical implications of this study extend beyond the specific sample, actively challenging and refining existing literature. First, this research decouples tourist responsibility from commercial transactions. The findings mathematically dismantle the dominant marketing paradigm which assumes that high customer satisfaction implicitly generates pro-environmental behavior. Data demonstrate that a visitor's ecological and social attitude cannot be bought through superior accommodation conditions; rather, sustainability is an act of will triggered by an internal transformation, not a reflexive reaction to comfort. Second, the study rehabilitates physical effort as a strategic conservation tool. While the industry has traditionally viewed physical effort or temporary discomfort as barriers to access, this research proves that overcoming personal limits is a primary predictor of ethical behavior. Effort should be embraced as a selection and education mechanism capable of triggering profound respect for a territory. Finally, the study highlights the toxicity of hyper-staged spaces. The statistical confirmation that postmodern authenticity decreases the intention for responsible behavior proves that excessive commercialization destroys the visitor's natural instinct to protect the destination. Transforming a space into a mere tourist scenography relegates the individual to a passive consumer, canceling any emotional connection or civic responsibility toward the local ecosystem.

Translating these empirical findings into strategic actions requires a decisive shift from passive consumption to transformational tourism. From a public policy perspective, funding must no longer be directed exclusively toward

invasive modernization or concrete infrastructure; instead, financial support must be strictly conditioned on community regeneration plans and the preservation of raw landscapes. In the private sector, hospitality entrepreneurs must differentiate themselves not through artificial luxury, but by orchestrating authentic interactions that force tourists out of their passivity. This paradigm shift also fundamentally alters the role of tour guides, who must transition from mechanical transmitters of historical data to facilitators of introspection, knowing when to allow silence for deep environmental connection.

On a practical level, destinations must replace passive digital catalogs with interactive gamification and digital orientation systems – such as treasure hunts – that challenge visitors to actively decode the territory. Correspondingly, destination branding should pivot from perfect drone aesthetics to narratives focused on the traveler's personal transformation and the rewarding nature of physical effort. Furthermore, social architecture must facilitate unmediated human interaction to break the tourist-spectator barrier, utilizing unstructured activities like "human bingo" during regional festivals. Finally, implementing micro-regional "endurance passports" – where access to local products is earned through the physical effort of walking between villages rather than exclusive financial transactions – serves as a highly effective tool to decouple responsibility from commerce and physically integrate the visitor into the local economy.

CONCLUSIONS

The methodological approach presents distinct limitations. The small sample size ($N = 80$) and the cross-sectional design restrict the absolute generalization of the findings and capture only immediate behavioral intentions rather than long-term actions, highlighting the need for future longitudinal studies. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data remains vulnerable to social desirability bias, and the specific geographic setting requires replicating the model in contrasting environments, such as urban areas facing mass tourism pressures. The negative impact of commercialization on visitor ethics warrants further qualitative investigation (e.g., in-depth interviews) to decode the psychological mechanisms of alienation within staged settings. Finally, potential market resistance to non-transactional paradigms should be addressed via quasi-experimental field testing of pilot projects centered on gamification and endurance passports.

This study validates a fundamental paradigm shift from transactional to transformational tourism, dismantling the long-standing myth that customer satisfaction automatically drives ecological and socio-economic responsibility.

Responsible behavior is completely decoupled from service quality and stems directly from existential and constructive connections with the visited space. The comparative analysis reveals that geography dictates human behavior: Via Transilvanica acts as an ecosystem of intentional effort that fosters self-discovery and preservation, whereas the leisure resorts of Bucovina expose the structural risk where hyper-commercialization alters the explorer into a passive, detached consumer. The methodological architecture (MANOVA and PLS-SEM) provided mathematical rigor, moving beyond descriptive assumptions to establish clear causal pathways directly in the field. Ultimately, this research serves as an assertive plea to preserve the geographical and cultural dignity of the Bucovina region by reintegrating silence, gradual exploration, and deep respect for the raw landscape into the design of tourist experiences.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Prior to participation, all respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the research and how their data would be utilized. Participants were assured of complete anonymity and data confidentiality. The survey was strictly non-interventional, and participants were informed that there were no risks associated with their voluntary involvement.

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