Exploring antecedents of destination brand engagement of tourists: The roles of destination brand experience and destination brand authenticity.

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Abstract
Research on destination brand engagement (DBE) within the tourism context has mainly focused on its outcomes rather than its antecedents. This study diverges from previous investigations to examine the impact of destination-focused drivers and a tourist-centric perspective on DBE. Specifically, the study explores how destination brand experience and destination brand authenticity (DBA) influence DBE. Results obtained from a sample of 530 tourists and tested using structural equation modeling techniques reveal that destination brand experience and DBA positively and significantly influence DBE. Finally, theoretical and significant managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: *destination brand experience, destination brand authenticity, destination brand engagement*

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, marketers have prioritized various conventional metrics such as brand awareness, brand trust, brand image, and others to effectively manage relationships between customers and brands (Hafez, 2021; Yasin & Shamim, 2013). Yet, as competition and the number of brands continue to rise, organizations are exerting significant effort to cultivate and sustain long-lasting rapport with consumers through these conventional metrics. Marketers are increasingly recognizing the necessity to redirect their attention towards engaging customers comprehensively to gain a competitive edge in building and fostering relationships between consumers and brands (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). Research conducted previously has substantiated the rising significance of the expression "customer engagement" in the field of marketing, highlighting its numerous benefits compared to conventional marketing metrics (e.g., Kumar et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2022). Within the domain of brands, experts have introduced the expression "consumer brand engagement" (CBE), focusing on its theoretical implications in comprehending diverse dimensions of consumer behavior (Carvalho & Fernandes, 2018; Solem & Pedersen, 2016).

In the past few years, efforts have been made to broaden the scope of CBE to the tourism industry. Prior studies have referred to the engagement of tourists with a destination as destination brand engagement (DBE) (Amani, 2022; Saleem et al., 2021). Previous investigations have mostly focused on the outcome of DBE rather than its antecedents. For example, in an investigation, Kumar & Kaushik (2020) showed how DBE promotes loyalty among tourists through their revisit intentions and inclination to recommend the destination to others. In a further study, Saleem et al. (2021) proved DBE as a significant determinant of environmentally responsible behaviors of tourists. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the antecedents of DBE by considering both destination-focused and tourist-centric factors in order to address the evident gap in empirical studies (Chen et al., 2020).

Often overlooked yet crucial factors from a destination-focused and tourist-centric perspective are the destination brand experience and destination brand authenticity (DBA). Destination brand experience is the overall perception and impression formed by tourists or visitors based on their encounters with the

destination's brand elements (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). It's about how the destination presents itself to the world and how this presentation influences visitors' perceptions, emotions, and experiences (Khan & Fatma, 2021). Brand authenticity in a destination is evaluated based on tourists' perceptions of its alignment with its identity (continuous), trustworthiness to tourists (credible), accountability (honesty), and support for tourists' self-expression (symbolic) (Morhart et al., 2015). Given that past studies on DBE have mostly considered its outcome rather than its antecedents within the tourism industry, this study seeks to address the following research questions: a) Does destination brand experience (i.e., sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral) exhibit a crucial role in impacting destination brand authenticity of tourists.; b) Does brand authenticity of the destination influence the engagement of tourists with the destination?

This study offers a plethora of contributions to pre-existing knowledge. It distinguishes itself among the first inquiries to investigate the direct influence of destination brand experience and DBA on DBE within the tourism context. Destination brand experience, identified as a primary destination-focused driver, and DBA, recognized as a tourist-centric perspective, were examined as antecedents of DBE. The study contributes to the brand authenticity literature within the tourism context, ascertaining its influence on DBE, given that past studies have often overlooked this relationship. It contributes to the attribution theory by shifting the focus from solely examining the outcomes of DBE to identifying the antecedents that foster its development through cognitive and physical processes. Furthermore, this study offers service providers and policymakers valuable perspectives on tourist behavior, allowing them to reassess current strategies and develop new ones to enhance their performance.

The study is organized as follows: A literature review on destination brand experience, DBA, and DBE is provided in Section 2. Section 3 outlines the theory, hypothesis, and the conceptual model. Section 4 explains the research methodology, followed by an analysis of the results in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 provides empirical discussions, theoretical and practical implications, key limitations, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Destination brand engagement

In various disciplines, the term "engagement" is found to have abundant meanings and diverse dimensions (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). For example, in the field of organizational behavior, employee engagement is defined as "an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that enhance one's sense of professional efficacy" (Maslach & Leiter, 2008, p. 498). The fundamental idea driving the employee engagement philosophy involves establishing conducive conditions for employees to maximize their potential in their work (Odai et al., 2021). From a marketing viewpoint, the term "engagement" seeks to explore consumer interactions with a product or service (Barger et al., 2016; Brodie et al., 2013). The definition of customer (or consumer) engagement (CE) in the business domain initially had its foundations in employee engagement (van Doorn et al., 2010). For instance, Kumar et al. (2010) provided a definition of CE as a collection of actions carried out by customers that impact a company's performance. These actions include procurements, feedback, commission-based referrals, social media interactions, and suggestions.

In tourism, CE is defined as "a customer's personal connection to a brand as manifested in cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses outside of the purchase" (So et al., 2014, p. 307). So et al. (2016) highlighted that CE is instrumental in nurturing positive assessments of trust and steadfast loyalty towards a tourism brand. Likewise, Rather et al. (2019) investigated the impact of CE, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, on customer experience and identification within tourism destinations. Moro & Rita (2018) assert that tourists deeply engaged in a destination brand community are inclined to propagate favorable word of mouth regarding the destination.

2.2 Destination brand experience

Brand experience is gaining importance in product branding due to its crucial role in thoroughly evaluating consumer reactions to a brand (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017). It's depicted as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). Prior research postulates that brand experience mainly comprises four dimensions.: sensory, behavioral, affective, and intellectual. The sensory dimension describes consumers' intuitive and strong

cognition; the behavioral dimension relates to interactions with the brands; the affective dimension involves intentions and emotions; the intellectual dimension elucidates the necessity for consumers to contemplate the brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

While brand experience shares connections with other established brand components or constructs, such as brand trust, brand attachment, and brand personality, it remains distinct. Brakus et al. (2009) highlighted that brand experience surpasses the aforementioned brand constructs, as they lack a comprehensive and holistic conceptual framework for assessing a consumer's diverse experiences with a brand. Brand experience evokes sensations, cognitions, thoughts, and actions triggered by various stimuli, emerging when customers engage with a specific brand directly or indirectly (Brakus et al., 2009). Barnes et al. (2014) broadened the scope of brand experience to include tourism destinations, introducing the notion of Destination brand experience. Destination brand experience is defined as the emotions and significance that travelers associate with enjoyable experiences while visiting a destination (Singh & Mehraj, 2018).

2.3 Destination brand authenticity

In marketing literature, brand authenticity has been conceptualized as how much a brand's image reflects a deeper meaning beyond just surface-level management of impressions (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019). For instance, brand authenticity has been described as a consciously constructed attribute, shaping how individuals subjectively perceive it rather than being an innate aspect of objective reality (Bruhn et al., 2012). Brand authenticity is portrayed as the perceived coherence of a brand's actions, reflecting its fundamental principles and standards, by which it is seen as genuine, preserving its brand identity and substantial essence (Fritz et al., 2017). Rosado-Pinto et al. (2020) assert that the authenticity of a brand should be reliable to its identity and effectively conveyed to consumers so that consumers perceive, believe, and form positive impressions about the brand based on their subjective experiences. From a managerial viewpoint, the importance of brand authenticity stems from its influence on consumer decisions and actions (Tarigan et al., 2021).

Despite the fact that brand authenticity is acknowledged in brand positioning management, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on its definition (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). The diversity of definitions of brand authenticity stems from the different philosophical foundations of authenticity, including objectivism, existentialism, and constructivism (Tarigan et al., 2021). Yi et al. (2017) assert that existential authenticity, being applicable to a wider array of tourism activities, has been utilized extensively in literature. Based on this notion, Chen et al. (2020) defined destination brand authenticity (DBA) as " the extent to which a tourist subjectively evaluates a destination as continuous, credible, honest, and symbolic". Research on brand authenticity is somewhat scarce, especially within the tourism and hospitality sector (Chen et al., 2020; Tarigan et al., 2021). Therefore, additional research is needed to advance its comprehension, particularly within the setting of tourism destination brands.

3. Theory and Hypothesis
3.1 Destination brand experience and destination brand authenticity

Brand experience and brand authenticity nexus can be understood through Heider's (1958) attribution theory, which suggests that individuals' perceptions of the motives behind their previous actions shape their future behavior and responses. Human experience enables us to distinguish between internal and external triggers, facilitating comprehension of implications and anticipation of experiential occurrences (Amer et al., 2023). Rodrigues et al. (2023) assert that each consumer interaction with a brand presents a chance to differentiate it from competitors and enhance its bond with customers. Exceptional brands typically possess a distinct understanding of their identity and values, which they consistently reflect in their communication style and demeanor across all interactions. This sense of coherence often arises effortlessly, laying the groundwork for authenticity (Tran & Nguyen, 2022). A brand is perceived as authentic by customers when they believe that the company fulfills its promises (Raza et al., 2021).

Prior research has showcased a favorable impact of the dimensions of brand experience on brand authenticity in diverse sectors. For instance, in the beauty care industry, Raza et al. (2021) found a positive association between brand experience and brand authenticity. These findings align with the results of Tran & Nguyen (2022), who similarly identified a notable positive association between brand experience and brand

authenticity in the fashion context. Furthermore, Park et al. (2023), in the commerce industry, proved that each brand experience dimension positively influences brand authenticity, except for the behavioral dimension. Additionally, Murshed et al. (2023) demonstrated a positive impact of brand experience on brand authenticity in the automobile industry. In a recent investigation within the tourism setting, Khan & Fatma (2021) demonstrated a favorable connection between online destination brand experience and DBA. According to attribution theory, consumers associate the positive outcomes of their affective, behavioral, sensory, and intellectual brand experiences with external factors such as authentic traits and steady brand conduct (Safeer et al., 2020). Therefore, we argue that when tourists encounter destinations that create a long-lasting experience, this will create favorable perceptions of authenticity for the destination brand. We hypothesize that:

H1: A positive nexus exists between sensory brand experience and destination brand authenticity.

H2: A positive nexus exists between affective brand experience and destination brand authenticity.

H3: A positive nexus exists between intellectual brand experience and destination brand authenticity.

H4: A positive nexus exists between behavioral brand experience and destination brand authenticity.

3.2 Destination Brand authenticity and destination brand engagement
Brands perceived as authentic are typically associated with favorable behavioral and psychological responses from consumers. Numerous investigations have emphasized the beneficial psychological impact of brand authenticity on brand love (Manthiou et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2023), brand credibility (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018; Srivastava et al., 2020), consumer-brand relationships (Lee & Chung, 2020; Oh et al., 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2022), product quality (Koh, 2020) and psychological ownership (Kumar & Kaushal, 2021). Regarding the behavioral reactions of brand authenticity, studies have examined word of mouth (Yildiz & Ülker-Demirel, 2017), brand loyalty (Carroll et al., 2022), and purchase intention (Loebnitz & Grunert, 2022) across various contexts. Specifically, previous research on the impact of brand authenticity has reinforced the significance of consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity in influencing both psychological and behavioral consumer reactions (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022). However, investigations into the nexus between brand authenticity and CBE, a fundamental marketing objective, have been scarce within the tourism context.

A recent investigation by Chen et al. (2020) in the tourism context identified DBA as a significant influence of DBE. The authors asserted that when consumers view a destination brand as authentic, it triggers positive cognitive and emotional responses. This, in turn, facilitates the development of brand loyalty, resulting in heightened engagement with the destination brand. A consumer who affiliates positively with a brand will likely engage with it, expressing identification through additional behaviors such as providing product feedback, initiating responsive communication, and engaging in word-of-mouth activities (Ahearne et al., 2005). Consumers actively strive for authenticity when choosing brands to consume, prioritizing perceived authentic brands in their responses (Rose & Wood, 2005). Safeer et al. (2020) argue that, according to attribution theory, positive experiences shape consumer perceptions of authenticity, prompting them to connect with a brand and foster positive affection for it (i.e., internal attribution). We argue that as tourists perceive a destination to be authentic, this will trigger behavioral and psychological responses in the form of engagement, supporting the submissions of the attribution theory. Research is required to empirically ascertain the association between DBA and DBE. This leads us to formulate the hypothesis that:

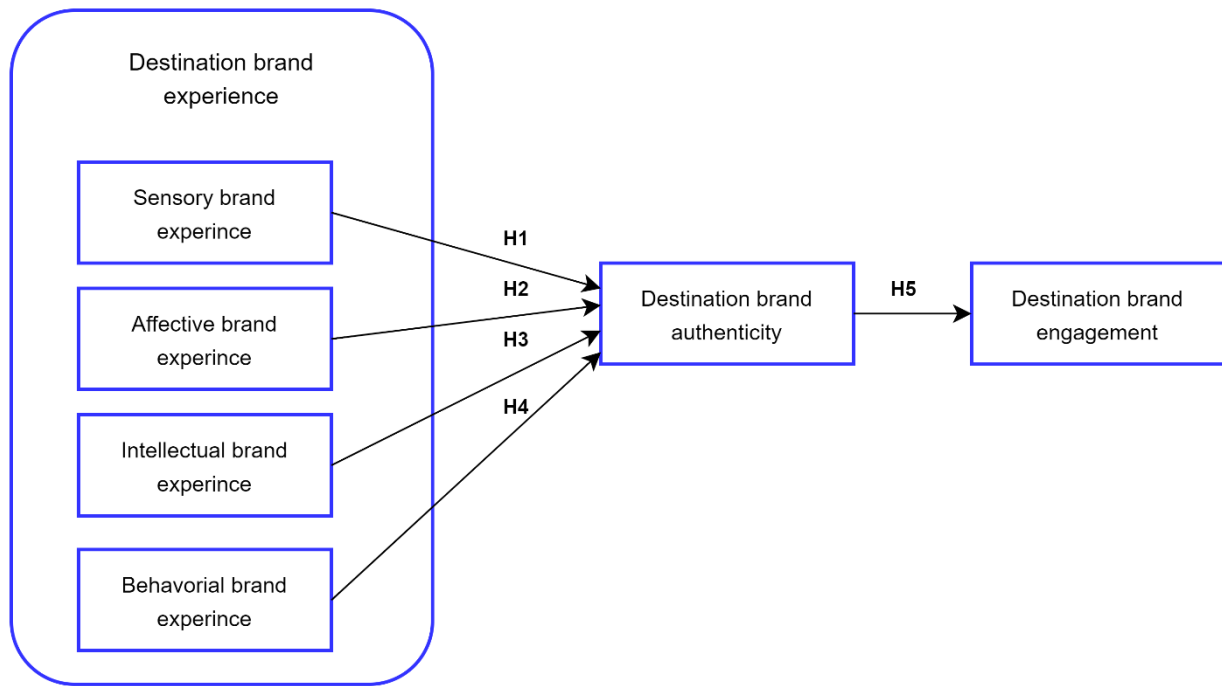**H5: A positive nexus exists between destination brand authenticity and destination brand engagement.**

Figure 1| Research model

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample and data collection

To analyze the study's hypothesis, data was collected utilizing a self-administered questionnaire in English for five months from foreign tourists who visited the town of Victoria Falls, a tourist destination located in the northwestern region of Zimbabwe. The population comprises foreign tourists from diverse origins, such as America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. The town of Victoria Falls was chosen for the study due to its status as a renowned tourist destination, offering a wealth of attractions and amenities for visitors. Its strategic location near the iconic Victoria Falls provided a prime setting for studying tourist behaviors and perceptions in a diverse and dynamic environment. Additionally, the town's popularity among international tourists ensured a rich and varied pool of respondents for the research study. Initially, the participants were asked questions relating to their demographic features (i.e., gender, age, etc.) and then about their visit (e.g., Initial and motive of visit). We ensured thorough randomness in the data collection by initially selecting various tourist sites, including cafes, tourist attractions, and recreational venues within the town of Victoria Falls. Out of 542 responses obtained, 530, yielding a response rate of (97.8%) was utilized for the final analysis, given that 12 responses were found to be incomplete.

Table 1 presents a wide coverage of the demographic features of the study participants. Out of the 530 questionnaires obtained from the study participants, 236 (44.53%) were male, and 294 (55.47) were female, with the majority falling within the age range of 44 and above. A significant number of them held a bachelor's degree 347 (65.47%). The majority were from America 230 (43.40%), followed by Europe 120 (22.64%), Asia 100 (18.87%) and Australia 44(8.30), and 36 (6.79) from other parts of the world. Most of them were first-time visitors 429 (80.94%) to the town of Victoria Falls, mainly for the purpose of leisure 380 (71.70%), adventure tourism 74 (13.96%), business trips 46 (8.68%) and for other reasons 30 (5.66%).

Table 1| Demographic profile

Profile	Categories	Number	%
Gender	Male	236	44.53
	Female	294	55.47
Age	18-30	45	8.49
	31-43	175	33.02
	44 and above	310	58.49

Education	High school or below	33	6.23
	Bachelor's degree	347	65.47
	Master or PhD	150	28.30
Origin	Europe	120	22.64
	America	230	43.40
	Asia	100	18.87
	Australia	44	8.30
	Others	36	6.79
Initial visit	Yes	429	80.94
	No	101	19.06
Visit motive	Leisure	380	71.70
	Adventure tourism	74	13.96
	Business trip	46	8.68
	other	30	5.66

4.2 Measurements

All the measurements (**Table 2**) originated from pre-existing scales and were adjusted to suit the study's specific context. This study assessed destination brand experience with 12 items, utilizing brand experience measures by Barnes et al. (2014), encompassing (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions). DBA was conceptualized as a cohesive (second-order) construct and assessed using 9 items (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Prior investigations (e.g., Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Khan & Fatma, 2021) revealed that the model fit was superior when DBA was treated as a second-order (cohesive) construct compared to a first-order construct, comprising three components (temporal consistency, credibility, and originality). DBE was measured utilizing 6 items from (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2016). Additionally, our study utilized reversed questions for some items to prompt respondents to read and respond to the survey questions carefully.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Analysis strategy

Structural equation model (SEM) was utilized to evaluate the model's fitness (measurement model) and hypothesis (structural model). SEM was chosen because of its capacity to handle complex relationships among multiple variables simultaneously. SEM facilitates the examination of both observed and latent variables, making it well-suited for analyzing higher-order constructs (Wetzels et al., 2009). Its comprehensive framework enables the direct assessment of relationships between variables, thereby providing a robust method for testing theoretical models and hypotheses (Hair et al., 2016).

5.2 Measurement model

Table 2 displays the tested reliability and validity measures for all constructs. These measures consist of Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and factor loadings. The findings demonstrate that all the loadings for the latent constructs were above the suggested value of 0.6 (Chin et al., 2008), lending support to the results of past findings (Ahakwa, 2024; Odai et al., 2021). Values for α, CR, and AVE were above the suggested values of 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020). These outcomes supported the internal consistency, construct reliability, and convergent validity of the model, lending credence to the result of past findings (Ahakwa, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Korankye et al., 2021).

Table 2| Model assessment

Items	Number	Loadings
Destination brand experience-Sensory (α=0.819; CR=0.892; AVE=0.734)		
Victoria Falls makes a strong impression on my senses visually and in other ways.	DBESe1	0.858
I find Victoria Falls interesting in a sensory way.	DBESe2	0.861

Victoria Falls does not appeal to my senses (r).	DBESe3	0.851
Destination brand experience-Affective **(α= 0.828; CR= 0.897; AVE=0.744)**		
Victoria Falls induces feelings and sentiments.	DBEAf1	0.871
I have strong emotions towards Victoria Falls.	DBEAf2	0.861
Victoria Falls is an emotional area.	DBEAf3	0.856
Destination brand experience -Intellectual **(α=0.819; CR=0.892; AVE=0.734)**		
I engage in a lot of thinking when I am at Victoria Falls.	DBEIn1	0.854
Victoria Falls does not make me think (r).	DBEIn2	0.858
Victoria Falls stimulates my curiosity and problem solving.	DBEIn3	0.858
Destination brand experience-Behavioral **(α= 0.786; CR=0.875; AVE=0.700)**		
I engage in activities and behaviors when I am at Victoria Falls.	DBEBe1	0.831
Victoria Falls gives me bodily experiences.	DBEBe2	0.824
Victoria Falls is an actively oriented (r)	DBEBe3	0.855
Destination brand Authenticity-Temporal consistency **(α=0.813; CR=0.889; AVE=0.727)**		
Victoria Falls stands out as a tourist destination because of its history.	DBAT1	0.837
Victoria Fall's history makes the location/town attractive as a tourist destination.	DBAT2	0.860
Victoria Falls has a historical heritage that is always interesting to visit	DBAT3	0.861
Destination brand Authenticity-Credibility **(α=0.774; CR=0.869; AVE=0.689)**		
I believe that Victoria Falls meets the expectations as a tourist destination.	DBAC1	0.856
Victoria Falls is realistic in terms of the tourist experience that it promises to tourists.	DBAC2	0.863
Victoria Falls is an honest destination in terms of the tourist experiences advertised	DBAC3	0.769
Destination brand Authenticity-Originality **(α=0.822; CR=0.894; AVE=0.737)**		
Victoria Falls is an original tourist destination to visit.	DBAO1	0.861
Victoria Falls can be defined as an authentic tourist destination.	DBAO2	0.866
Victoria Falls clearly distinguishes itself from other tourist destinations.	DBAO3	0.849
Destination brand engagement (α= 0.871; CR=0.901; AVE=0.566)		
I would like to share my experience in Victoria Falls with other tourists.	DBE1	0.887
If I'm asked my opinion, I will recommend Victoria Falls without hesitation.	DBE2	0.730
I would always give my honest opinion Victoria Falls as a tourist destination.	DBE3	0.730

I would like to interact with the destination organizations in Victoria Falls.	DBE4	0.740
I would participate with the destination organizations in Victoria Falls, making suggestions or providing ideas that would improve what they have on offer.	DBE5	0.698
I like to help other tourists to clear up their doubts regarding Victoria as a tourist destination.	DBE6	0.792

Note: r= reverse coded; α= Cronbach alpha; CR= Composite radiality; AVE= Average Variance extracted

Table 3 presents the results of discriminant validity assessed utilizing the Fornell-Lacker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Testing for discriminant validity is crucial because it guarantees that different constructs in a study are truly distinct, not just variations of the same underlying concept. By confirming that measures intended to represent separate constructs do not correlate too highly with each other, one can trust the uniqueness of each construct being studied (Cheung et al., 2023). Discriminant validity is assessed by comparing the square root values of AVE for each underlying construct with the correlations among those constructs. Since all the square root values of AVEs exceeded the correlations, this confirms discriminant validity, aligning with the results of prior studies (Ahakwa, 2024; Ofori et al., 2023).

Table 3| Discriminant validity

Constructs	DBEAf1	DBEBe	DBE	DBEIn	DBAO	DBESe	DBAT	DBAC
DBEAf	**0.863**							
DBEBe	0.655	**0.837**						
DBE	0.549	0.650	**0.752**					
DBEIn	0.614	0.656	0.679	**0.857**				
DBAO	0.370	0.412	0.559	0.477	**0.859**			
DBESe	0.624	0.534	0.552	0.533	0.587	**0.857**		
DBAT	0.566	0.586	0.300	0.676	0.596	0.554	**0.853**	
DBAC	0.685	0.417	0.434	0.564	0.611	0.512	0.596	**0.830**

Note: Bolded values = AVE square root; Values outside the diagonal= correlations; DBEAf = Destination brand experience-Affective; DBEBe= Destination brand experience-Behavioral, DBE= Destination brand engagement; DBEIn= Destination brand experience-Intellectual; DBAO= Destination brand authenticity- Originality; DBESe= Destination brand experience-Sensory; DBAT= Destination brand authenticity- Temporal consistency; DBAC=Destination brand authenticity- Credibility.

5.3 Multicollinearity and common method bias

The study used two procedures to check for common method bias (CMB). First, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was tested to assess potential multicollinearity and check for CMB issues (**Table 4**). Multicollinearity is a phenomenon in statistics that arises when predicting constructs in a model highly correlate (Kyriazos & Poga, 2023). Higher values suggest that it becomes challenging to accurately assess the contribution of predictors to a model (Bock, 2020). Kim (2019) proposes that VIF values exceeding 5 for all constructs indicate problematic multicollinearity within the model. However, all constructs had VIF values lower than 5, proving the non-existence of multicollinearity issues in the model. Kock (2017) argues that if a VIF exceeds 3.3, it suggests severe collinearity and raises the prospect of a model being influenced by CMB. The absence of VIF values surpassing the 3.3 benchmark indicates that the model is devoid of CMB.

Additionally, this study estimated CMB by implementing Herman's single-factor test as recommended by (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The main concept underlying this approach is when a substantial amount of CMB exists, a single factor will become apparent through factor analysis, or one overarching factor will explain most of the covariance observed among the measures. According to the results of this test, CMB in our research does not appear to be a significant concern, as the initial factor accounted for a relatively small portion of the variations observed (35.46%).

Table 4| Collinearity values (VIF)

Constructs	Indicators	VIF
Destination brand experience-Sensory	DBESe1	1.844
	DBESe2	1.871
	DBESe3	1.760
Destination brand experience-Affective	DBEAf1	1.955
	DBEAf2	1.899
	DBEAf3	1.826
Destination brand experience-Intellectual	DBEIn1	1.750
	DBEIn2	1.855
	DBEIn3	1.879
Destination brand experience-Behavioral	DBEBe1	1.547
	DBEBe2	1.655
	DBEBe3	1.797
Destination brand Authenticity-Temporal consistency	DBAT1	1.981
	DBAT2	2.256
	DBAT3	2.295
Destination brand Authenticity-Credibility	DBAC1	2.265
	DBAC2	2.387
	DBAC3	1.407
Destination brand Authenticity-Originality	DBO1	2.355
	DBO2	2.909
	DBO3	1.779
Destination brand engagement	DBE1	3.123
	DBE2	1.791
	DBE3	1.745
	DBE4	1.778
	DBE5	1.626
	DBE6	2.011

5.4 Hypothesis testing

Table 5 displays the derived values of the path estimates, along with their corresponding t-statistics. All of the path estimates in the conceptual model, significant at the 0.05 significance level, offer statistical backing for the direct hypothesized relationships. The results indicate that destination brand experience: sensory (β =0.410; T=10.759), affective (β =0.259; T=3.567), intellectual (β =0.164; T=3.931) and behavioral (β =0.132; T=3.019) positively relates with DBA. Again, the results proved that DBA positively relates to DBE (β =0.834; T=11.58).

Table 5| Relationships test results

Relationship	Path (β)	T-statistics	P-value	Decision
Destination brand experience-Sensory→ Destination brand authenticity	0.410	10.759	0.000***	Supported
Destination brand experience-Affective→ Destination brand authenticity	0.259	3.567	0.000***	Supported
Destination brand experience-Intellectual→ Destination brand authenticity	0.164	3.931	0.000***	Supported
Destination brand experience-Behavioral→ Destination brand authenticity	0.132	3.019	0.003**	Supported
Destination brand authenticity→ Destination	0.834	11.58	0.000***	Supported

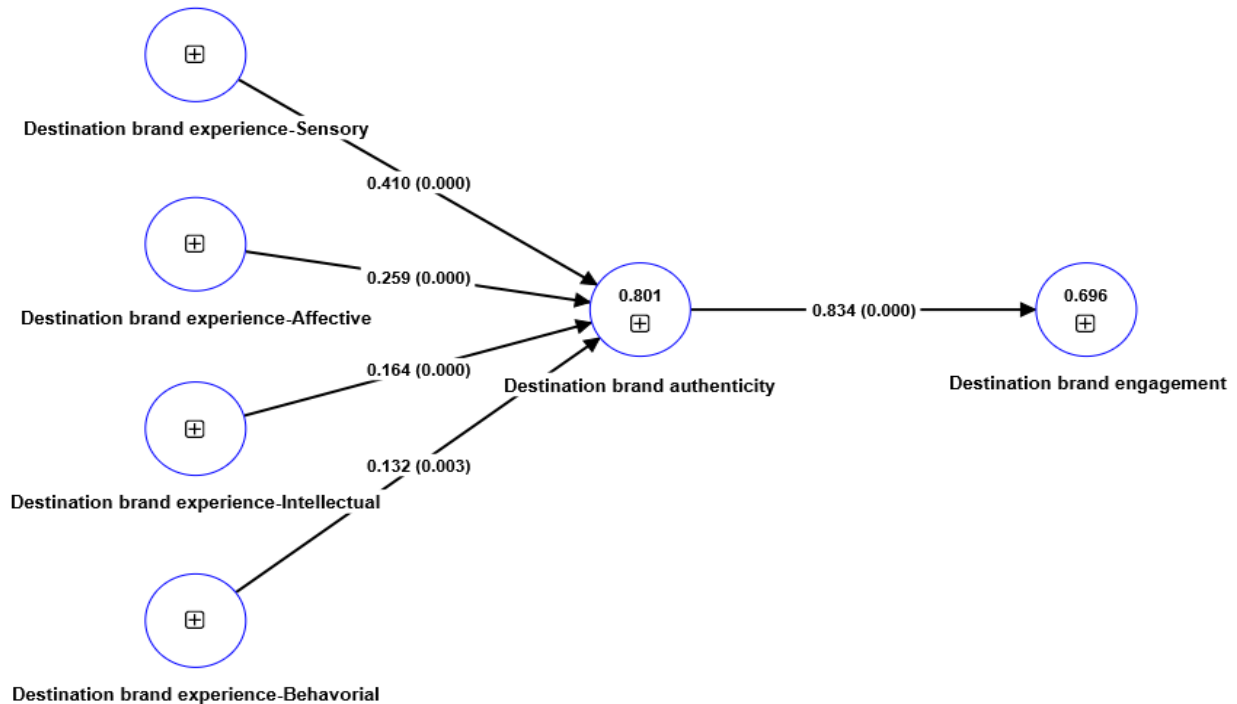| brand engagement				

Notes: significant at T-value >1.96; ***p<0.05

Figure 2| Structural model

Table 6 presents the results of two distinct techniques employed by the study to ascertain the model's predictive power. R^2 values display the variations in the outcome variables owing to the predicting variables. The R^2 values of 0.801 and 0.696 in the study are above the 0.26 threshold proposed by Cohen (1988), indicating the model's notable predictive capability. Again, the blindfold analysis was used to estimate the model's predictive capability. A Q^2 above 0 signifies the model's predictive capability, while a Q^2 below 0 indicates the opposite. Q^2 values of 0.689 and 0.384 substantiate the model's predictive capability for the outcome variables.

Table 6| Predictive power

Construct	R²	Adjusted *(R²)*	*Q square (Q²)*
Destination brand authenticity	0.801	0.800	0.689
Destination brand engagement	0.696	0.695	0.384

6. Discussion

The results demonstrate a desirable effect of all elements of destination brand experience: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral on DBA. Under different contexts, unlike the findings of Park et al. (2023), where all elements of brand experience proved to have a desirable effect on brand authenticity with the exception of the behavioral aspect, our results align with the outcome of past investigations (Murshed et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Brand authenticity results from favorable brand experiences that foster prosperity and long-lasting brand growth (Safeer et al., 2020). Additionally, the results proved that DBA has a desirable effect on DBE, supporting past research findings (Chen et al., 2020).

It was discovered that tourists' sensory, affective and intellectual experiences result in a greater level of DBA, compared to behavioral, particularly in tourism services. Just like tourists' external sensations are vital in their overall experience, internal sensations, including sensory, affective, and intellectual experiences, are foundational. They serve as the lens through which individuals perceive and interpret their surroundings. Before tourists can fully engage with the external environment, their internal sensations set the tone, guiding

their perceptions (destination authenticity) and responses. Positive cognitive and physical interactions with a destination by consumers enrich the authenticity of brands and encourage consumer engagement with the destination.

6.1 Theoretical implications

First, this study stands out as one of the first to investigate the direct influence of destination brand experience and DBA on DBE in the tourism context. Studies examining destination brand experience, DBA (Heitmann, 2013; Yi et al., 2017), and brand engagement (Xu et al., 2020) in the tourism sector are sparse (Bryce et al., 2015; R. Chen et al., 2020). France et al. (2016) urged for an investigation into the antecedents influencing brand engagement through a comprehensive model. Therefore, in this study, destination brand experience, identified as a primary destination-focused driver, and DBA, recognized as tourist-centric perspective, were examined as antecedents of DBE. The results demonstrate that DBE, as an outcome, stems from antecedents like destination brand experience and DBA. Moreover, each dimension of destination brand experience: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral, directly impacts DBA, and DBA, in turn, directly influences DBE. This study enriches academic understanding of the DBE within the tourism context.

Second, the study provided empirical evidence proving that DBA has a positive impact on DBE. Investigations into brand authenticity are still in its early stages, and there is still a need for further exploration of the concept (Morhart et al., 2015; Södergren, 2021). Previous studies have investigated the impact of brand authenticity on brand and customer associations, concentrating on aspects such as brand trust (Eggers et al., 2013; Portal et al., 2019), brand love (Manthiou et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2023), and brand attachment (Arya et al., 2019; Assiouras et al., 2015). However, the influence of brand engagement has been overlooked. Manthiou et al. (2018) highlighted that an authentic experience significantly enhances customer engagement. While the relevance of authenticity is acknowledged in the tourism sector, studies on brand authenticity within the destination context remain scarce (Chen et al., 2020; Tarigan et al., 2021). In addition to substantiating the positive impact of DBA on DBE, we also emphasized DBA as a second-order construct of a reflective–reflective nature and illustrated its reliability and validity.

Last, by shifting the focus from solely examining the outcomes of DBE to identifying the factors that foster its development, this study presents a significant advancement in the attribution theory. Specifically, our investigation delves into the multifaceted elements of destination brand experience, including sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions. Within the framework of attribution theory, we explore how these variables interact with DBA and influence tourists' engagement with the destination brand. Furthermore, our study sheds light on the pivotal role of destination brand authenticity as a foundational construct in shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors. By examining these dynamics through the lens of attribution theory, we uncover the underlying cognitive and physical processes that drive tourists' engagement with the destination brand, offering a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

6.2 Practical implications

In today's landscape, destinations operating as brands encounter growing challenges, particularly in attracting and engaging tourists. First, this study emphasized the vital importance of tourist experiences in fostering DBE. In particular, the findings suggest that destination brands aiming to improve tourists' perceptions of destination authenticity should turn their attention to engineering sensory, affective, and intellectual brand experiences. This would naturally lead to delivering emotional experiences to customers. Furthermore, it is crucial for service providers to prioritize the emotions and sentiments of customers, particularly concerning their consumption of tourism destinations. This entails (a) offering appropriate entertainment choices, (b) facilitating an opportunity for them to detach from reality, and (c) presenting aesthetic attractions or locations for exploration.

Second, service providers should also focus on the behavioral aspect of brand experience. For example, efforts must be made to prioritize tourists' physical actions influenced by their lifestyle, coupled with an intellectual aspect that prompts reflection and sparks curiosity. For example, destination marketers (i.e., service providers) might arrange specific online and offline events that would subsequently engage tourists

in physical experiences and inspire imaginative thought. This would motivate existing and promising tourists to join in and offer their invaluable input for organizing various other activities and events.

Finally, the findings acknowledge the significance of DBA in directly instigating DBE. Service providers looking to encourage destination brand-engaged tourists should create and execute effective positioning strategies with a focus on brand authenticity, which is deemed a crucial positioning tool (Osorio et al., 2023; Safeer et al., 2020). These strategies can be initiated through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X to enhance consumer perceptions of brands and increase customer equity. These findings convey an important message to practitioners, indicating that they must recognize the need for dedicated efforts in building authenticity for destination brands.

6.3 Limitations and future investigations

This scope of the study is limited to a particular destination, Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other destinations. It's important to acknowledge that each destination possesses its unique features and identity. Thus, future investigations could prioritize duplicating a similar study in multiple destinations with varied samples to verify if the outcomes remain consistent across diverse locations. Additionally, the dataset consists solely of foreign visitors, limiting the ability to generalize the results as the impacts on domestic tourists may vary significantly. Hence, future investigations should consider including domestic tourists to facilitate comparisons of perceptions. Investigating brand experiences of tourists from various countries with distinct cultures would also be intriguing (Andreini et al., 2019). For example, according to Okharedia (2017), tourists from developing nations are believed to place greater emphasis on intangible cues than those from developed countries. However, further research and empirical evidence are needed to explore this relationship. Finally, this study relied solely on a survey as a data collection method. Future research endeavors should incorporate qualitative methodologies such as focus group discussions and interviews to gain more insight into the phenomenon investigated.

6.4. Conclusion

This study aimed to deepen insight into DBE by examining the impact of destination-focused and tourist centric drivers. In essence, it investigates destination brand experience from the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral standpoints and DBA as an antecedent, analyzing their impact on DBE. Overall, this study significantly augments the current body of literature by offering an enhanced understanding of tourists' experiences and perceptions of a destination, influencing their engagement with that particular destination. Our overall findings emphasize the necessity of crafting a distinctive, captivating, and authentic brand experience with a destination.

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