

# A construal level view of contemporary heritage tourism

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological distance is “a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now” (Trope & Liberman 2010, p. 440). This research investigates heritage tourism from the perspective of Construal Level theory, which postulates that individuals mentally represent objects and events by adopting either low or high construal levels. We show that heritage tourism leads tourists to adopt a higher psychological distance and therefore a higher construal level. In turn, this higher construal negatively affects destination loyalty and perceived uniqueness. However, authenticity and engagement moderate the heritage–construal relationship, counterbalancing the higher psychological distance induced by heritage. We explore these relationships in two studies focusing on contemporary heritage sites. This further allows to compare visitors’ mental representations of the experience, based on their memory type. The paper concludes by addressing implications for theory and practice.

## 1. Introduction

Heritage tourism is a relevant and vivid type of tourism (UNESCO, 2021) that “focuses on a ‘destination’s historic, natural, and cultural value” (Bonn et al., 2007, p. 135). It concerns “the motivation to experience various items, representative of past and present periods, at a tourist destination” (Park et al., 2019, p. 99).

An increasingly wide body of research has sought to understand what determines the uniqueness of the heritage tourism experience (e.g., Chung et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2022). If enacted successfully, heritage tourism will leverage the history of the place to add depth to the experience (e.g., Chhabra et al., 2003; Ram et al., 2016). Tourism practitioners often pursue this strategy at many different levels, such as recreating events or situations that used to occur in the past (e.g., Chhabra et al., 2003), or using genuine symbolic links to the past (e.g., Yi et al., 2022).

By its very nature, heritage tourism focuses on the past (Anastasiadou & Vettese, 2021)—and thus, it requires a temporal gap between the historical events it focuses on and the tourists’ present (Leighton, 2007). In other words, heritage tourism strategies create a temporal distance between the tourist and the place. On this basis, we seek to apply the theoretical lens of Construal Level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) to the phenomenon of heritage tourism. Granted, we are not the first to use Construal Level theory in tourism [see Supplementary Materials:

Table 1]: Previous studies have applied it to how tourists process tourism-related messages (e.g., Gradzzini et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2016), such as reviews and ads (e.g., Riasi et al., 2018; Stamolampros & Korfiatis, 2018). By contrast, this research addresses the effects of heritage-related tourism on visitors’ mental representation of the experience and its consequences for destination loyalty and perceived destination uniqueness.

Furthermore, this research addresses authenticity and engagement from a Construal Level theory perspective, showing how these factors interact with the construal level in shaping the mental representation of the heritage tourism experience. Accordingly, we developed the framework in Fig. 1 [p.13] to delineate potentially detrimental mediating effects (high construal) and beneficial moderating effects (engagement and authenticity) in heritage tourism.

Accordingly, our research questions are: Does heritage tourism affect visitors’ mental representation of the experience? If so, how? What are the consequences of this mental representation on destination loyalty and perceived destination uniqueness?

To answer these questions, we start from the consideration that studies in psychology show that a focus on the past can shift attention away from tangible features. Aspects such as history and values are considered abstract features in Construal Level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In turn, psychology scholars have demonstrated that the temporal distance between individuals and the object they are

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experiencing can affect how said object is evaluated and mentally construed.

Consequently, this research makes a threefold contribution to the literature. First, it demonstrates that heritage tourism activates a higher construal level, leveraging the temporal dimension of psychological distance. Second, it demonstrates that higher construal levels negatively affect destination loyalty and the perceived uniqueness of the destination. Third, it highlights that engagement and authenticity operate on (i.e., reduce) the social dimension of psychological distance; thus, they counterbalance the negative effects of temporal distance on construal.

This research is among the first to treat tourism as the very driver of the construal level. Such theorization is novel in tourism and sheds a different, albeit complementary light on the relationship between heritage tourism, authenticity, and engagement. Only [Massara and Severino \(2013\)](#) have addressed the Construal Level theory regarding (non-contemporary) heritage tourism. The authors suggested that construal level might yield consequences for satisfaction and spending behavior, but did not test or measure these claims. This is partly because their research was very explorative and partly because the Behavioral Identification Form scale that is used to measure construal had not yet been developed in 2013 ([Lee et al., 2014](#)). Furthermore, they focused on cognitive distance, which is negatively related to knowledge or experience, as they correctly acknowledged. In contrast, this research focuses on the temporal dimension of psychological distance, which has not been frequently addressed in tourism (e.g., [Kim et al., 2016](#); [Li et al., 2019](#)).

## 2. Context of analysis

This research is set in the context of contemporary heritage—the “heritage of the recent past” ([Walton, 2009](#), p. 790). Contemporary heritage expands the scope of heritage tourism to include areas like industrial sites, military installations, and sites that hold relevant sociocultural significance in more recent times ([Benjamin et al., 2016](#); [Goulding, 2000](#)).

Three reasons drove our choice to consider contemporary heritage. First, we wanted to show that the effects on construal level induced by heritage tourism can stem from destinations that pertain to a less-remote past. Second, contemporary heritage is the only type of heritage that allows us to compare the perceptions and mindsets of tourists who hold autobiographical (i.e., personal), vicarious (i.e., family-transmitted), and collective memories ([Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017](#)) of that time ([Benjamin et al., 2016](#)). Third, contemporary heritage sites fared better with the travel limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic than other forms of tourism ([Romagosa, 2020](#)).

## 3. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 3.1. Construal Level Theory in tourism

Construal Level theory argues that the psychological distance between individuals and objects determines how they think about those objects (i.e., abstractly or concretely) ([Trope & Liberman, 2010](#)). Psychological distance is “a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now” ([Trope & Liberman, 2010](#), p. 440). Thus, an object is psychologically distant “whenever it is not part of one’s direct experience” ([Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007](#), p. 84). Specifically, “psychologically distant things (objects, events) are those that are not present in the direct experience of reality (...) People believe that they directly experience themselves and their immediate surroundings at the present moment. Anything that is not present is distal. It may be thought of, constructed, or reconstructed, but it cannot be experienced directly” ([Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007](#), p. 353). Construal Level theory posits that the mental representations of the same object may vary according to the individual psychological distance from that object ([Liberman et al., 2002](#)). Accordingly, individuals represent objects at different construal levels according to different levels of psychological distance ([Kyung et al., 2014](#)).

Construal levels can be low or high: Individuals use the former (vs. the latter) to represent proximal (vs. distant) objects and events ([Liberman et al., 2002](#)). Individuals perceive fewer differences between high-construal objects (e.g., places) due to the more abstract representation of such objects. Accordingly, when there is a large psychological distance between the individual and a place or event, then said object will be more likely conceived in high-construal (i.e., abstract) terms ([Kyung et al., 2014](#)). By contrast, individuals perceive more differences in more concrete terms for low-construal objects perceiving more differences and variety ([Fujita et al., 2006](#)). Furthermore, scholars in psychology have demonstrated that psychological distance can be articulated along four dimensions: temporal, social, spatial, and probabilistic (see, e.g., [Liberman et al., 2007](#)).

Several previous studies in tourism have addressed Construal Level theory or considered psychological distance, either as their main objective or incidentally [for a detailed review, see Supplementary Materials: [Table 1](#)]. Overall, these studies accept that visitors can indeed construe tourism-related objects at different construal levels. However, in all cases, tourism was the setting or the topic of the messages being processed. For instance, scholars investigated the effects of different message framings for hotels and restaurants (e.g., [Huang et al., 2021](#); [Jeong & Shawn Jang, 2015](#)), such as verbal and pictorial presentation ([Jia et al., 2021](#)) and message abstractness or concreteness ([Kim et al., 2016](#); [Sung et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, only a handful of these studies addressed temporal distance; among those, only one investigated the effects of psychological distance in the past rather than the future ([Ouyang et al., 2019](#)). It found that residents’ evaluation of a sports

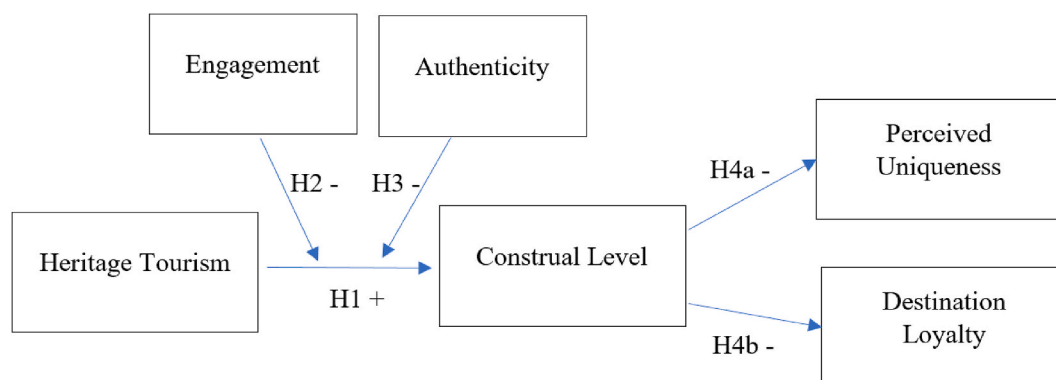


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

event was framed in terms of high construal when it took place further in the past.

This research goes beyond previous studies by positing that tourism itself can be the driver of the construal level. Here, people are not processing information related to something touristic (like planning a future journey, choosing a menu, or reviewing a hotel); rather, their construal level stems from the tourism experience itself. Furthermore, this research addresses temporal distance and focuses on the past. Specifically, it considers that heritage tourism leverages the temporal dimension (Park et al., 2019) to create a temporal gap between the place and tourists (Leighton, 2007).

In line with Construal Level theory, we argue that, because heritage tourism emphasizes the temporal dimension of psychological distance, it induces tourists to adopt a higher construal level for mentally representing the tourism experience. Accordingly:

**H1:** Heritage tourism increases tourists' construal level.

In summary, the mechanism we posit is that this type of tourism makes visitors focus on—or at least be more aware of—the past. Thus, heritage tourism should increase the perceived temporal distance between the object of evaluation (the tourism place and experience) and the evaluator (the visitor). The increased psychological distance arising from the temporal dimension should then induce a higher construal level in heritage tourists.

### 3.2. Engagement and construal level

Previous studies in tourism have established that visitors can develop personal connections with heritage places and events (e.g., Biran et al., 2011; McCain & Ray, 2003; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015). In this vein, engagement increases individuals' connectedness to objects (Scheinbaum, 2016) and represents the "positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer-brand interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 149).

Engagement is also a relevant research topic in tourism. For instance, scholars have found that engagement can contribute to destination loyalty (Rather et al., 2022), improve attitudes (So et al., 2016), attendance (Regan et al., 2012), and value co-creation (Shin & Perdue, 2022). Engagement has been conceptualized both as behavioral (van Doorn et al., 2010) and psychological (Brodie et al., 2011) and can be cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (e.g., Fang et al., 2020). Despite the different possible conceptualizations, scholars agree on its core interactive nature (Harmeling et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Rather et al., 2022), which has high applicability in tourism (Harrigan et al., 2017; Shin & Perdue, 2022). Furthermore, like other recent studies in tourism, this research follows the widely adopted multi-dimensional perspective that conceptualizes engagement as comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral facets (Rather et al., 2022; Taheri et al., 2014).

Notably, engagement reduces the distance "from the core self" (Massara & Severino, 2013, p. 116) and is characterized by passion and immersion: It stimulates tourists to enhance contact and look for immersiveness (Chen & Rahman, 2018). In turn, previous studies in psychology have found that passion, contact, and immersiveness are associated with the social dimension of psychological closeness (Won et al., 2018) and tend to lower construal (Rim et al., 2015). In summary, we posit that higher levels of engagement might translate into a lower psychological distance between the tourist and the destination, thereby lowering the construal level adopted to mentally represent the tourism experience. Thus, we interpret engagement and, more broadly, tourists' connections to heritage places by adopting the perspective of Construal Level theory. Formally, we posit:

**H2:** Engagement moderates the heritage tourism–construal level relationship so that the construal level will be lower for engaged tourists.

This is to say, we argue that heritage-related strategies might be seen as increasing the temporal dimension of psychological distance (H1). In contrast, engagement might be seen as reducing the social dimension of psychological distance, counterbalancing the effects of heritage on construal (H2).

### 3.3. Authenticity and construal level

Scholars agree that authenticity is a pivotal construct for understanding heritage tourism (Budruk et al., 2008; Ram et al., 2016). Indeed, perceptions of authenticity are crucial to the success of heritage destinations (e.g., Frost, 2006), events (e.g., Akhoondnejad, 2016), and experiences (e.g., del Barrio-García & Prados-Peña, 2019). Authenticity "refers to objects or events that are genuine, true, real, and unadulterated in the mind of the beholder" (Wong, 2015, p. 6) and means to be real and genuine (Chhabra, 2005). It includes legitimacy, believability (di Domenico & Miller, 2012), originality (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), and a lack of feigning (Park et al., 2019).

Previous studies in tourism have identified two main types of authenticity: object-related (further split into objective and constructive) and experience-related or existential (further split into intrapersonal and interpersonal) (Li et al., 2021). Thus, authenticity has been referred to places, attractions, and experiences (See Park et al., 2019 for a review). Existential authenticity (Wang, 1999) "may have nothing to do with the authenticity of toured objects" (Park et al., 2019, p. 101) and is more a philosophical concept (Li et al., 2021). However, scholars argue that existential authenticity can be understood under constructivist authenticity and have shown that object-related authenticity significantly contributes to existential authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Yi et al., 2017).

Objective authenticity, instead, envisions authenticity as a feature of objects that is external to (and independent from) the tourist (Cook, 2010). However, previous studies have shown that subjective authenticity perceptions drive tourists' behavior more than actual authenticity (e.g., Lu et al., 2015).

Accordingly, several recent studies have adopted a constructive view of authenticity that envisions it as symbolic because it depends on tourists' beliefs, expectations, and imagery while interacting with the tourism context (Kim & Jamal, 2007). In summary, the tourist experience stems from the subjective negotiation of the meaning of the toured objects (Li et al., 2021).

The present research adheres to the constructive authenticity perspective, advancing that such a perspective acquires new meaning from the theoretical lens of Construal Level theory. The psychology literature has established that individuals adopt a more concrete mindset (i.e., a lower construal level) when they interact with tangible objects and their attributes in a physical context (Ding & Keh, 2017; Trope et al., 2007). In turn, adopting a lower construal enhances the perceived difference among objects and attributes, ultimately making them appear more unique (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012). Translating Construal Level theory considerations into the domain of heritage tourism, we posit that authenticity will help tourists adopt a more concrete mental representation and thus apply lower construal to their interpretation of the tourism experience. This should be especially prevalent in cases where there is tangible heritage—such as architecture, buildings, interior decorations, and other physical objects (Yi et al., 2017). As a result, the perception of the destination's uniqueness should be enhanced.

Furthermore, the tourism literature agrees that authenticity evokes and enhances mental imagery processing (Le et al., 2019). It stimulates multisensory and contextual details, which help tourists feel immersed in the events testified by the heritage site (Buzova et al., 2020). Indeed, the psychological literature reports that objects evoking vivid mental

imagery enhance the “being there” feeling (Ding & Keh, 2017). Thus, they are perceived as psychologically closer (Trope & Liberman, 2010)—that is, at a lower construal level (Bar-Anan et al., 2006).

Accordingly, we posit that the vivid mental imagery, fostered by authenticity, inclines tourists to adopt a more concrete mindset toward the heritage tourism experience. In other words, we posit that authenticity reduces the psychological distance between the heritage destination and the tourist by inducing a lower-level mental construal. Thus:

**H3.** Perceived authenticity moderates the heritage tourism–construal level relationship, so that construal level will be lower when tourists perceive authenticity.

In short, we argue that the psychological distance induced by heritage tourism (H1) will be lower when tourists perceive high levels of authenticity (H3).

### 3.4. Construal level and tourists' behavior and perceptions

When the construal level is high, consumers tend to develop abstract images of objects that seem less differentiated and novel. When the construal level is low, by contrast, consumers think in more concrete terms that enhance perceptions of differentiation and variety (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In a similar vein, if heritage tourism cultivates a higher psychological distance, tourists may develop an appreciation for the heritage site largely based on abstract cues. Specifically, a consequence of adopting a higher (i.e., more abstract) mental representation is that objects and events are perceived as less diverse: high construal is denoted by general and undifferentiated features (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In this vein, studies in brand management have found that higher psychological distance leads to a less unique consumption experience (Massara et al., 2020). Thus, in high-construal settings, tourists could live a more generalized experience without focusing attention on details (e.g., appreciating the general beauty of a place without capturing its specific features (Massara & Severino, 2013)). In this sense, the tourism literature has demonstrated that tourists' adoption of lower (higher) construal levels increases (decreases) the salience of details (e.g., in the evaluation of ridesharing services; Jang et al., 2021).

This research posits that heritage tourism increases the construal level (H1). In line with the tenets of Construal Level theory that, as construal level increases, perceived differentiation among the objects of evaluation flattens (Lamberton & Diehl, 2013), this research posits that heritage tourism could negatively affect tourists' perception of the destination uniqueness. Therefore:

**H4a.** Heritage-induced higher construal level leads to lower perceived destination uniqueness.

Literature Among tourists, loyalty is usually applied toward destinations (Tasci et al., 2022). Destination loyalty encompasses a future commitment and desire to re-visit (Moore et al., 2017), an actual return to, and a willingness to recommend the destination, despite the availability of several alternatives (Oppermann, 2000; Tasci et al., 2022). Scholars have generally explained destination loyalty as a function of emotions (Ribeiro et al., 2018), emotional attachment (Poria et al., 2004; Prayag & Ryan, 2012), and destination image (Zhang et al., 2014). In particular, destination loyalty has been “linked to the heart and the emotional experience while at the destination” (Patwardhan et al., 2020, p. 5). This consideration is particularly relevant from the perspective of Construal Level theory, as emotional attachment and “the heart” appear to pertain to lower construal levels (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2016) and characterize a more concrete mindset (Scarpi, 2021). Notably, previous studies in marketing have shown that a flattening of perceived differentiation among objects (i.e., brands, products, etc.) lowers loyalty (Kittur & Chatterjee, 2021; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Specifically, higher construal levels seem to hasten consumers' lack of loyalty to a brand

(Maier & Wilken, 2014).

This research advances that heritage tourism tends to increase the construal level (H1), which we expect to have a negative effect on destination loyalty, given the latter's link to the emotional attachment with the destination (Patwardhan et al., 2020; Poria et al., 2004). Therefore:

**H4b.** Heritage-induced higher construal level leads to lower destination loyalty.

### 3.5. The conceptual model

H1 and H4 posit that heritage tourism could potentially lead to higher construal levels that, in turn, negatively affect the perceived destination uniqueness and destination loyalty. Thus, they advance that construal level works as a mediator of the relationship between heritage tourism and destination uniqueness/loyalty. H2 and H3 add that tourists' feelings of engagement and authenticity moderate the relationship between heritage tourism and construal level, and thereby mitigate the negative effects of heritage tourism on construal level. The model presented in Fig. 1 captures hypotheses H1 to H4.

### 3.6. Further considerations: visitors' memories

Psychologists have identified different types of memory, such as: (1) autobiographical (i.e., memories from personal, direct experiences, usually starting around the 7th year of age; Daselaar et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2005); (2) vicarious (i.e., memories from experiences not lived in person but told to by relevant others; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017); and (3) collective (i.e., a population's shared memories and historical conscience; Roediger & Abel, 2015).

Studies in tourism suggest that people make judgments about what is authentic based on their autobiographic memories, while collective memories make this assessment more difficult (King, 2006). Furthermore, studies in psychology and neuroscience have shown that vicarious memories closely resemble autobiographical memories and work similarly (Pillemer et al., 2015). Overall, scholars find that autobiographical and vicarious memories are stronger and more vivid (Hirst et al., 2009; Rabin et al., 2010) than collective memories (Pillemer et al., 2015). In turn, studies in tourism have related memory vividness with visitors' engagement (Campos et al., 2017).

Accordingly, we expect that, on average, there will be more engagement and authenticity for heritage tourists who hold autobiographical and vicarious memories (versus collective memories or no memories at all) about the places they are visiting. Thus:

**H5:** Visitors with autobiographical or vicarious memories will feel more engagement (H5a) and authenticity (H5b) than visitors with collective or no memories.

## 4. Study 1

### 4.1. Setting

We chose the national Resistance Museum in Italy as our heritage site. Resistance movements were popular, political, and military struggles waged at the end of the Second World War in countries occupied by the Axis powers (Nazi-Germany, Fascist-Italy, and Japan). Arguably, Italy was one of the countries where the conflict was more heated and intricate: Between September 1943 and April 1945, the country was split in two. The North and Center were largely under the control of German forces and the Italian Social Republic, a puppet state established by Nazi-Germany. Southern Italy, instead, was largely under the control of the Allied Forces. During that period, members of the Resistance contributed to freeing the country (ANPI, 2016).

The Resistance left an undeniable legacy, both tangible and



intangible: The heterogeneous factions participating in the Resistance movements in their respective countries (Anarchists, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Communists, Monarchists, and Socialists, to name only a few), and their different political instances, developed into today's political parties after WWII that evolved into today's political parties (Cooke, 2011). There are several sites, national holidays, and events that have been instituted in order to preserve the memory of the Resistance in the collective conscience of the Country.

#### 4.2. Sample and measurements

We recruited a total of 300 virtual-tour visitors (mean age = 26.51; 42.9% F) over two weeks during Summer 2021. The survey instructions included a definition of heritage from Bonn et al. (2007) to ensure against conceptual ambiguity. Respondents were asked how much they felt their visit fit the definition of heritage tourism. They also were asked to state the importance of heritage motives (Poria et al., 2006, 2009) for their visit. After that, the questionnaire asked respondents about perceived authenticity (Yi et al., 2022), engagement (Rather et al., 2022), perceived uniqueness (Chaudhuri, 2002), and destination loyalty (Patwardhan et al., 2020) using 7-points Likert scales.

To measure construal level, all respondents answered a one-item measure of how psychologically close they felt to the destination (Scarpi, 2021). Following the advice and actions of the developers of Construal Level theory, we asked respondents the shortened Behavioral Identification Form scale (BIF; Lee et al., 2014, p. 1023), similar to Kim et al. (2016). The BIF consisted of eight neutrally described actions, each followed by two alternative restatements: one about concrete, specific aspects of the action (i.e., low-level), and one about abstract, general aspects (i.e., high-level). For example, a neutral action such as "making a list" has alternative restatements such as "writing things down" and "getting organized," respectively. By coding the concrete identifications as 0 and the abstract ones as 1, the BIF scale measures construal levels ranging from 0 (completely low-level) to 8 (completely high-level).

Given that previous studies have suggested a relationship between mood and construal (Labroo & Patrick, 2009), we sought to rule out mood-based explanations. Thus, respondents completed the mood scale proposed by Watson et al. (1988; p. 1067) (similar to Fujita et al., 2006). T-tests confirmed that there were no significant differences between the initial and final answers to the study variables.

#### 4.3. Results for the model

**Measurements:** A factor analysis with AMOS 25 ( $\chi^2/df = 2.10$ ; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.94) and Cronbach's alphas ranging between 0.83 and 0.88 support the validity of the measures. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.57 to 0.76, while the Composite Reliability (CR) ranged from 0.81 to 0.90. Thus, they exceeded the recommended minimum thresholds of 0.5 for AVE and 0.7 for CR, demonstrating convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Finally, the minimum AVE (0.57; Authenticity) exceeded the highest squared correlation between any two variables (0.22, Authenticity with Engagement), thereby satisfying the Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criterion.

To estimate common methods variance, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis in line with Baldauf et al. (2009) and Patwardhan et al. (2020). The one-factor test showed that a single factor, assessed on all items, significantly worsened fit indices, with a significant chi-square difference ( $\chi^2/df = 12.6$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, common method variance did not appear to be an issue in this study (Park & Tussyadiah, 2020).

**Model estimation:** AMOS 25 in SPSS 25 was first used, and the goodness-of-fit statistics indicate an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2/df = 1.56$ ; RMSEA = 0.05;  $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.95). The path estimates show that heritage tourism led to higher construal ( $B = 0.847$ ,  $SE = 0.383$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ; H1), which negatively affected perceptions of destination uniqueness ( $B = -0.563$ ,  $SE = 0.207$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ; H4a) and

destination loyalty ( $B = -0.743$ ,  $SE = 0.193$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ; H4b). Tourism heritage had no direct effect on the perceived destination uniqueness ( $B = 0.004$ ,  $SE = 0.079$ ,  $p = 0.956$ ) and directly affected loyalty ( $B = 0.203$ ,  $SE = 0.074$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), indicating partial and full mediation by construal level, respectively.

**Moderation results:** The moderating effect of engagement and authenticity on the relationship between heritage tourism and construal level was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstrapping. The interaction between engagement and heritage tourism had a significant negative effect on visitors' construal level ( $B = -0.223$ ,  $SE = 0.106$ ,  $p = 0.037$ , 95%CI [-0.433; -0.014]). This indicates that heritage tourism increased construal level less for highly engaged tourists, in support of H2. H3 was similarly supported, as the interaction between authenticity and heritage tourism was significant and negative on visitors' construal level ( $B = -0.356$ ,  $SE = 0.112$ ,  $p = 0.002$ , 95%CI [-0.578; -0.134]). In other words, heritage tourism increased the construal level less when visitors experienced high authenticity. The PROCESS test of highest order unconditional interactions was significant for both engagement ( $R^2\text{-change} = 0.020$ ,  $F(1,199) = 4.425$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ) and authenticity ( $R^2\text{-change} = 0.045$ ,  $F(1,199) = 10.024$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). The negative signs in the moderations mean that authenticity and engagement, as predicted, buffered the increase in construal level stemming from heritage tourism.

When a model specifies two moderators for a single but common path, PROCESS does not provide a single index of moderated mediation; instead, it offers two partial moderated mediation indexes, one for each moderator (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020). In our case, they are 0.02 (BootSE = 0.01; 95% BootCI [0.00; 0.05]) for engagement and -0.03 (BootSE = .02; 95% BootCI [-0.07; 0.01]) for authenticity. They were both significant, as the 95% confidence interval with 5000 bootstraps did not contain zero (Hayes, 2018), which supports the robustness of both moderations and that of the overarching model.

Overall, the findings support the structure of the theoretical model and the hypotheses. The results are graphically depicted in Fig. 2.

Respondents' age ( $B = -0.007$ ,  $SE = 0.009$ ,  $p = 0.411$ , 95%CI [-0.025; 0.010]), gender ( $B = 0.260$ ,  $SE = 0.204$ ,  $p = 0.891$ , 95%CI [-0.375; 0.431]), and mood ( $B = -0.059$ ,  $SE = 0.082$ ,  $p = 0.473$ , 95%CI [-0.221; 0.103]) did not moderate the heritage-construal relationship.

#### 4.4. Additional insights for memory type

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they hold autobiographical, vicarious (i.e., family-transmitted), collective, or no memories of the Resistance. The results from a MANOVA—with memory type as the independent variable—showed significant differences at the multivariate level (Wilks  $\lambda = 0.832$ ,  $F = 4.23$ ,  $df = 9$ ; 485,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.060$ ). Post-hoc univariate Scheffé comparisons revealed a significant effect on both authenticity ( $F = 3.678$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.052$ ) and engagement ( $F = 9.628$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.126$ ). Specifically, (1) no differences emerged in the mean score for engagement ( $p = 0.442$ ) and authenticity ( $p = 0.172$ ) between those with autobiographical and vicarious memories; (2) the latter memories, however, led to higher scores than collective memories in the mean value of engagement (4.612 vs. 4.260;  $p = 0.013$ ) and authenticity (5.374 vs. 4.918,  $p = 0.002$ ); (3) a lack of any type of memory (autobiographical, vicarious, collective) led to the lowest mean score for engagement (2.917,  $p < .001$ ) and authenticity (4.250,  $p < 0.001$ ), as advanced in H5.

### 5. Study 2

To further validate the results from Study 1 and generate external validity, we conducted Study 2 on an unrelated contemporary heritage site. We interviewed a total of 250 virtual-tour visitors of the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site, a former Cold War military facility, during a two-week period in autumn 2021. Minuteman covered "the far western portion of South Dakota from 1963 through the early 1990s"

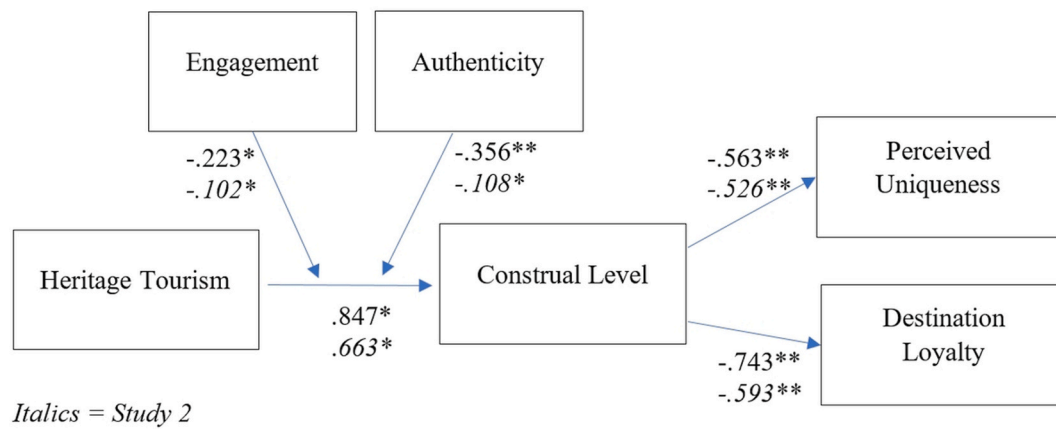


Fig. 2. The model with estimates.

(US-NPS, 2021). The site is no longer operative and has become a tourism location, attracting several thousand visitors every year (US-NPS, 2021). The site preserves a launch control surface facility that supports an underground launch control center and its original missile silo and weapon systems.

### 5.1. Results for the model

**Measurements:** Like before in Study 1, the results of a CFA with AMOS 25 ( $\chi^2/df = 2.16$ ; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.96) support the validity of the measures, with Cronbach's alphas ranging between 0.85 and 0.92. Harman's one-factor test confirmed that a single factor, assessed on all items, worsened the fit indices, producing a significant chi-square difference ( $\chi^2/df = 15.2$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that common methods variance was not a problem in Study 2.

**Model estimation:** Parallel to Study 1, the results from Study 2 displayed a good fit ( $\chi^2/df < 1.7$ ; RMSEA = 0.05;  $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) < 0.001$ ; NNFI, CFI = 0.95) and offer ecological validity. Once again, we found that heritage raised the construal level ( $B = 0.663$ ,  $SE = 0.329$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ; H1), which then diminished perceived uniqueness ( $B = -0.526$ ,  $SE = 0.193$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ; H4a) and destination loyalty ( $B = -0.593$ ,  $SE = 0.188$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ; H4b). As in Study 1, the direct effect of heritage on destination uniqueness ( $B = 0.090$ ,  $SE = 0.086$ ,  $p = 0.297$ ) was not significant. Contrary to Study 1, the direct effect on loyalty ( $B = -0.103$ ,  $SE = 0.084$ ,  $p = 0.221$ ) was not significant in Study 2.

**Moderation results:** Study 2 also tested the moderating effect of engagement and authenticity on the relationship between heritage tourism and construal level, again using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstrapping. Again, the interaction between engagement and heritage tourism was significant and negative on visitors' construal level ( $B = -0.102$ ,  $SE = 0.051$ ,  $p = 0.049$ , 95%CI [0.001; 0.203]), with heritage spurring a smaller increase in construal level for highly engaged tourists; this result supports H2. Similarly, Study 2 uncovered a significant and negative interaction between authenticity and heritage tourism ( $B = -0.108$ ,  $SE = 0.053$ ,  $p = 0.042$ , 95%CI [-0.212; -0.004]): heritage increased construal level less when authenticity was high. The PROCESS test of highest order unconditional interactions was significant for both engagement ( $R^2\text{-change} = 0.013$ ,  $F(1,244) = 3.924$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ) and authenticity ( $R^2\text{-change} = 0.014$ ,  $F(1,244) = 4.196$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ). The path estimates are illustrated in Fig. 2.

Like in Study 1, the partial moderated mediation indexes (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020) for engagement (Index = 0.01; BootSE = 0.01; 95% BootCI [0.01; 0.03]) and authenticity (Index = 0.02; BootSE = 0.01; 95% BootCI [-0.03; -0.01]) were both significant, as the 95% confidence interval with 5000 bootstraps did not contain zero (Hayes, 2018). This evidence further substantiates the robustness of the model.

Lastly, and parallel to Study 1, the moderations by age ( $B = -0.001$ ,

$SE = 0.007$ ,  $p = 0.882$ , 95%CI [-0.014; 0.012]), gender ( $B = -0.030$ ,  $SE = 0.156$ ,  $p = 0.847$ , 95%CI [-0.337; 0.277]), and mood ( $B = 0.008$ ,  $SE = 0.078$ ,  $p = 0.924$ , 95%CI [-0.147; 0.162]) were not significant.

### 5.2. Additional insights for memory type

Respondents were asked whether they hold autobiographical, vicarious (i.e., family-transmitted), collective, or no memories of the Resistance. As in Study 1, a MANOVA accounting for memory type showed a significant main effect at the multivariate level (Wilks  $\lambda = 0.912$ ,  $F = 2.542$ ,  $df = 9$ ; 594,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.030$ ). Univariate post-hoc Sheffé comparisons showed that memory type affected the mean scores of both authenticity ( $F = 4.698$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.054$ ) and engagement ( $F = 2.650$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.031$ ). Specifically, as advanced in H5 and found in Study 1, the mean scores in engagement and authenticity did not differ between tourists with autobiographical and vicarious memories (Engagement\_autob. = 3.924 vs. Engagement\_vic. = 4.112,  $p = 0.632$ ; Authenticity\_autob. = 4.970 vs. Authenticity\_vic. = 4.733,  $p = 0.468$ ). A lack of memories led to the lowest mean scores for engagement (3.215) and authenticity (4.035).

## 6. Discussion

This research examined the phenomenon of heritage tourism from the theoretical perspectives of Construal Level theory. It examined the path relationships between heritage tourism, construal level, authenticity, engagement, perceived uniqueness, and destination loyalty. Further, this research addressed a contemporary heritage context and compared tourists who hold autobiographical, vicarious, collective, and no memories of the historical events.

This research makes four theoretical contributions. First, it advances our understanding of heritage tourism experiences (Bonn et al., 2007; Chung et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2022) by focusing not on the features of places or historical re-enactments (Chhabra et al., 2003; Ram et al., 2016; Scarpi, Mason, & Raggiotto, 2019), but the mindset of the tourists. This finding expands the perspective of previous studies by linking psychological distance to the tourism experience, demonstrating that heritage tourists construe the experience at a more abstract level. Few studies have addressed psychological distance in heritage settings, even though temporal distance perceptions are central in this domain (Anastasiadou & Vettese, 2021; Leighton, 2007). The present study demonstrates that heritage tourism is an important determinant of psychological distance.

Consequently, the study's second contribution is to Construal Level theory: This research identified heritage tourism as an antecedent of the construal that individuals adopt to process their tourism experience, thereby advancing the knowledge of elements that influence construal

(e.g., Hansen & Melzner, 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Slepian et al., 2015; Scarpi, 2021). While Construal Level theory is not novel in tourism, it has mostly been used to understand how individuals process tourism-related messages, such as tourism and hospitality-related ads and reviews (e.g., Huang et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2016; Stamolampros & Korfiatis, 2018). Instead, this research is the first to demonstrate that the very experience of heritage tourism drives visitors' construal level. Furthermore, it is the first to demonstrate that high construal levels impact theoretically and managerially relevant dependent tourism variables (i.e., loyalty and uniqueness). The results show that high construal can harm tourists' loyalty and perceptions of destination uniqueness.

In this vein, the study's third contribution is to the literature on authenticity and engagement. The results support previous research in tourism about the centrality of authenticity (Akhoondnejad, 2016; Park et al., 2019) and engagement (Harrigan et al., 2017; Shin & Perdue, 2022) in shaping tourists' heritage experience. However, this research adds novel insights regarding the effect of authenticity and engagement on tourists' mental representation of the experience, demonstrating that they interact with psychological distance. Specifically, we show that the mechanism through which authenticity and engagement work in heritage tourism is to lower the construal level that visitors use to represent the tourism experience in their minds. This way, authenticity and engagement both counterbalance the negative effects of the heritage-induced higher construal level. Otherwise, heritage's singular focus on temporal distance might hamper destination loyalty and uniqueness perceptions.

Ultimately, the research was set in contemporary heritage settings, which allowed us to compare tourists with autobiographical (i.e., first-hand), vicarious (i.e., family-related), and collective memories (Daseelaar et al., 2008; Roediger & Abel, 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017). This comparison is usually impossible for other heritage tourism studies and – to the best of the authors' knowledge – is novel in the tourism literature. The results add that memory type affects tourists' levels of engagement and authenticity. Particularly, vicarious and autobiographical memories strengthened tourists' engagement and perceived authenticity more than collective memories.

In conclusion, this research uncovered a novel relationship between heritage tourism and Construal Level theory, suggesting that heritage tourists construe information at a higher construal level, which leads to lower perceived uniqueness and destination loyalty unless counterbalanced by high engagement and authenticity. The findings reveal a wealth of information about tourists' processing of the heritage experience, while substantiating suggestions and evidence from the extant tourism and psychology literatures. In short, our results extend prior research to the domain of heritage tourism by digging deeper into the "psychological meanings" that visitors assign to the heritage tourism experience (Fu et al., 2019, p. 100).

## 7. Managerial implications

Practitioners are increasingly recognizing the opportunities for tourism development offered by leveraging the touristic appeal of heritage sites. Noticeably, even if the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt tremendous losses to the global tourism industry (UNWTO, 2020), heritage tourism has still proven valuable in several countries (Bertacchini et al., 2021; Romagosa, 2020).

While extant contributions in heritage tourism have concentrated on its positive outcomes on tourists' perceptions and behaviors, the present research also captures a potentially negative effect. For practitioners, the results show that heritage tourism needs to be accompanied by feelings of authenticity and engagement in order to be effectively leveraged. Indeed, focusing on the history of a site is not enough for success; visitors need to perceive the authenticity of, and be immersed in, a place's history in order to experience positive outcomes such as destination loyalty and perceived destination uniqueness.

In short, our results indicate that managers should pursue actions that convey a sense of authenticity and engagement that can foster loyalty and perceptions of uniqueness. In this vein, recent research suggests that practitioners should offer participants ways to make that history come alive. For instance, in 2020, the National Resistance Museum in Italy started restoring original documentaries filmed during the resistance times, comparing the cities during WWII bombings and today, as well as partnered with private citizens to acquire original items and war memorabilia. Notably, providing opportunities to increase engagement and feelings of authenticity enhances participants' sense of immersion in that history, on the one hand, and positively reflects on destination loyalty, on the other.

Furthermore, our findings emphasize the importance of keeping memory alive—and relatedly, that vicarious memories work as well as autobiographical memories. Thus, managers should invest in initiatives that preserve the past embodied by the contemporary heritage site, such as recording interviews with elderly witnesses who can transmit their autobiographical memories to the younger generation. Gaining insights into the everyday lives of past people can help visitors absorb vicarious memories and thereby change their mental representation of the events. In this vein, local witnesses' involvement might also benefit the local communities (Confente & Scarpi, 2021) by contributing to a more inclusive approach to heritage tourism development while also building psychological closeness.

## 8. Limitations and future research

The present research features some limitations. For the purpose of this research, we used a relatively simple conceptualization of heritage. Thus, future research could adopt a more fine-grained picture of heritage (Scarpi, 2021) and heritage tourism (Park, 2010, 2013). Furthermore, future research might explore how personal connections with heritage places and events (e.g., Biran et al., 2011; McCain & Ray, 2003; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015) can affect the perceived psychological distance and construal level. Similarly, this research did not consider how heritage-induced construal level affects tourists' emotional needs (Park, 2010) or their awareness and understanding of heritage. These would be fruitful avenues for future investigations.

Furthermore, the tourists considered in this research were visiting the heritage site for the first time. Thus, future research could investigate how previous visits to the site interact with personal memories of the historical events and, by extension, with construal. Do repeat visits to a heritage site help people form more vivid impressions of the past?

Finally, future studies could investigate additional variables as potential moderators of the heritage–construal relationship. Likewise, they could address drivers of engagement and authenticity to understand how to boost their beneficial effects on said relationship.

## Impact Statement

Individuals develop mental representations of the world according to their perceived psychological distance with objects, adopting low or high construal levels. Drawing on Construal Level Theory, the current paper adds that psychological distance (i.e., high or low construal levels) affects tourists' destination loyalty and perceived destination uniqueness. The findings unveil that heritage tourism activates a higher construal level, leveraging the temporal dimension of psychological distance, weakening loyalty and uniqueness. Results also highlight that engagement and authenticity are needed to counterbalance temporal distance's effects on construal level, destination loyalty, and perceived uniqueness. Focusing on contemporary heritage, we have the opportunity to compare and assess the role of tourists' autobiographical, vicarious, and collective memories as buffers of psychological distance. Practical insights follow for tourism managers and policymakers, helping them improve heritage marketing strategies that could reinforce visitors' relationship with the place and, ultimately, strengthen their

loyalty.

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**Declaration of competing interest**

None.

**Appendix A. Supplementary data**

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104648>.

**APPENDIX**

**Table A.1**

Questionnaire items

	Alpha		Mean		StD.	
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
<b>DESTINATION LOYALTY (Patwardhan et al., 2020)</b>	0.88	0.92				
I am willing to revisit this destination in the future			5.60	4.10	1.35	1.73
I am willing to recommend this destination to my family and friends			5.12	3.96	1.48	1.73
I stay for longer periods in this destination compared to any other			4.92	3.00	1.51	1.59
I come with more companions to this destination			5.40	3.54	1.22	1.77
I have a wonderful image of this destination as a heritage destination			5.26	3.42	1.39	1.70
<b>DESTINATION UNIQUENESS (Chaudhuri, 2002)</b>	0.85	0.89				
This destination is unique.			4.80	5.48	1.35	1.37
There is no substitute for this destination.			4.13	5.00	1.41	1.44
This destination is different from other destinations.			4.87	5.35	1.32	1.39
<b>ENGAGEMENT (Rather et al., 2022)</b>	0.83	0.92				
I feel very positive when I visit this destination.			4.27	4.02	1.48	1.56
Visiting this destination makes me happy.			3.77	3.54	1.37	1.62
I feel good when I visit this destination.			4.00	3.52	1.37	1.63
Visiting this destination gets me to think about it.			6.04	4.72	1.22	1.65
I think about this destination a lot when I'm visiting it.			5.22	3.26	1.53	1.64
Visiting this destination stimulates my interest to learn more about it.			5.69	2.81	1.35	1.70
I spent a lot of time visiting this destination compared with other destinations.			3.29	5.36	1.51	1.39
Whenever I'm visiting tourism destinations, I usually visit this destination.			3.21	3.89	1.56	1.60
I visit this destination the most.			3.17	3.90	1.57	1.59
<b>AUTHENTICITY (Yi et al., 2022)</b>	0.88	0.91				
Overall layout			4.81	4.77	1.24	1.37
Local architecture			4.63	4.39	1.20	1.36
Exterior and landscape/ interior design			4.62	4.28	1.37	1.45
Paintings and inscriptions			5.37	4.87	1.30	1.39
Stories or historical presentations			5.68	5.21	1.28	1.45
			5.02	4.50	1.27	1.54
<b>HERITAGE MOTIVES (Poria et al., 2009)</b>	0.86	0.85				
Highlights the connection between you and your personal heritage			2.99	2.91	1.50	1.49
Provides you with an emotional experience			2.45	3.67	1.23	1.58
Teaches you about your nation's history			1.86	5.41	1.19	1.50
Strengthens the understanding that the site belongs to your heritage and not to the heritage of other groups			2.29	3.48	1.22	1.73
Provides you with an emotional experience			1.80	5.58	1.01	1.42
Enriches your knowledge of the site			2.27	4.21	1.23	1.54

**Table A.2**

Model estimation results.

Hypothesis	Path	Study	Estimate (SE)	p
H1	Heritage → Construal level	S1	0.85 (0.38)	<0.05
		S2	0.66 (0.33)	< 0.05
H2	Moderation by Engagement	S1	-0.22 (0.11)	<0.05
		S2	-0.10 (0.05)	< 0.05
H3	Moderation by Authenticity	S1	-0.36 (0.11)	<0.05
		S2	-0.11 (0.05)	< 0.05
H4a	Construal level → Uniqueness	S1	-0.56 (0.21)	< 0.01
		S2	-0.53 (0.19)	< 0.01

(continued on next page)



Table A.2 (continued)

Hypothesis	Path	Study	Estimate (SE)	p
H4b	Construal level → Destination loyalty	S1	-0.74 (0.19)	< 0.01
		S2	-0.59 (0.19)	< 0.01
Direct effect Heritage → Uniqueness		S1	-0.01 (0.08)	Ns
		S2	0.09 (0.09)	Ns
Direct effect Heritage → Destination loyalty		S1	0.20 (0.07)	< 0.01
		S2	-0.10 (0.08)	Ns

S1: Fit:  $\chi^2/df = 1.56$ ; RMSEA = 0.05;  $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.95.

S2: Fit:  $\chi^2/df = 1.7$ ; RMSEA = 0.05;  $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.95.

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