FROM HERITAGE RESEARCH TO VISITOR EXPERIENCE: TURNING CULTURAL HERITAGE KNOWLEDGE INTO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRODUCTS

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Abstract

Cultural heritage is among the most important resources for destination development, yet a persistent gap separates the knowledge produced by heritage researchers (historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, conservation specialists) from the products that visitors actually experience. Research often remains in academic publications and archives, while tourism products are frequently built on simplified, commodified or inauthentic narratives that can erode the heritage they depend on. This paper examines how heritage research can be systematically translated into sustainable tourism products. Using a qualitative, interpretive design based on structured document analysis and thematic synthesis of scholarly literature and international policy instruments (UNESCO, ICOMOS, UNWTO, Council of Europe), the study identifies five recurring themes: (1) significance and authenticity as the foundation of product value, (2) interpretation as the mechanism that converts knowledge into experience, (3) community participation and shared governance, (4) experience design and visitor engagement, and (5) carrying-capacity management and monitoring. These themes are integrated into a six-stage Heritage-to-Experience Value Chain and a set of design principles for practitioners. The paper also outlines a mixed-methods protocol (interviews, observation, and a visitor survey) for empirically testing the framework in a specific destination. The findings suggest that sustainability is not an add-on to heritage tourism products but a result of how knowledge is selected, interpreted, governed, and monitored. The paper contributes a practical bridge between heritage scholarship and tourism product development, and it identifies research needs for empirical validation.

Keywords: cultural heritage, heritage research, sustainable tourism, visitor experience, interpretation, authenticity, product development, community participation

Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism, travel motivated by the desire to experience places, objects, practices and stories from the past and present, is one of the oldest and largest segments of global tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Richards, 2018). Governments and destination managers increasingly regard heritage as a driver of regional development, employment, identity and place branding. International organizations have reinforced this view, noting the synergies between tourism and culture while warning about the risks of unmanaged visitation (UNWTO, 2018; ICOMOS, 2022).

At the same time, heritage is not simply a stock of attractions waiting to be "used". Heritage is a social and cultural process in which meanings are selected, negotiated and communicated (Smith, 2006). Tourism is one of the most powerful channels through which these meanings reach the public. Where tourism is poorly designed, it may trivialize heritage, distort its history, exclude local communities or physically damage fragile sites. Where it is well designed, it can fund conservation, strengthen local pride and offer visitors meaningful learning and emotional experiences.

A recurring weakness in destinations is the gap between heritage research and tourism product development. Researchers produce detailed knowledge about sites, craft traditions, landscapes and intangible practices, but this knowledge is rarely written, organized or governed in a form that tourism professionals can use. Conversely, tourism operators often develop products from market logic alone, relying on a few popular stories, stereotypes or unverified legends. The

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result is a mismatch: research-rich destinations with weak products, or product-rich destinations with weak authenticity.
This gap matters for sustainability. The three classic pillars of sustainable tourism (environmental integrity, socio-cultural integrity and economic viability) are directly affected by how heritage knowledge is translated into products (Bramwell & Lane, 1993). Products built without research risk cultural erosion; research never translated into products delivers little social or economic benefit and gains little public support for conservation.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this paper is to develop and justify a framework that explains how heritage research can be turned into sustainable tourism products that deliver high-quality visitor experiences. The paper is guided by four research questions:

- **RQ1.** What conceptual foundations link heritage knowledge, authenticity and visitor experience?
- **RQ2.** Which mechanisms convert research knowledge into tourism products?
- **RQ3.** What conditions make such products sustainable in environmental, cultural, social and economic terms?
- **RQ4.** How can the resulting framework be tested empirically in a destination?

The paper contributes (a) an integrated synthesis of heritage studies, interpretation theory, experience-economy thinking and sustainable tourism, (b) a six-stage Heritage-to-Experience Value Chain, and (c) a validation protocol for future empirical work. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background, Section 3 describes the methodology, Section 4 contrasts qualitative and quantitative approaches and justifies the chosen design, Section 5 presents the results, Section 6 discusses them, and Section 7 concludes.

Theoretical Background

Heritage as process and resource

Heritage studies has moved from an object-centered view (monuments to be preserved) to a process-centered view in which heritage is a cultural practice of meaning-making (Smith, 2006). Ashworth and Turnbridge (1990) described heritage as a contemporary product shaped for contemporary purposes, which implies that tourism cannot avoid selecting and framing the past. Policy documents reflect this shift: the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) emphasizes the right of communities to participate in cultural heritage, and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) recognizes communities and practitioners as the primary bearers of heritage.

Authenticity

Authenticity is central to heritage tourism yet contested. Objectivist views treat authenticity as a property of the original object; constructivist and existential views treat it as negotiated or as a feeling of personal connection (Wang, 1999). Empirical work shows that perceived authenticity influences visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Chen & Chen, 2010). For product developers, the implication is that research provides the evidentiary basis for "object authenticity" while good experience design supports "existential authenticity".

Heritage interpretation

Interpretation is the communication process that reveals meanings and relationships to visitors. Tilden (1957) set out classic principles: relate to the visitor's experience, reveal rather than merely inform, provoke rather than instruct. Moscardo (1996) argued that effective interpretation promotes "mindful" visitors who actively engage with a site. Ham (2013) later framed interpretation as strategic communication aimed at thematic, relevant, and enjoyable messages. Interpretation is therefore the key mechanism that turns research knowledge into experience.

Visitor experience and the experience economy

Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed that economies progress from commodities to goods, services and experiences, with experiences varying along dimensions of participation (passive to active) and connection (absorption to immersion). Heritage products can be positioned along these dimensions: a guided lecture is passive absorption, while a craft workshop or a staged archaeological discovery is active immersion. Research on heritage tourists shows that experience quality contributes to perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010). Poria, Butler and Airey (2003) further demonstrated that visitors' perceived personal connection to heritage, not only the site's formal status, shapes the heritage tourism experience.

Sustainability, carrying capacity and participation

Butler's (1980) tourist area life cycle warned that destinations can move from exploration to stagnation or decline when development is unmanaged. Sustainable tourism requires management of visitor numbers, site conservation and benefit sharing (Bramwell & Lane, 1993). McKercher and du Cros (2002) stressed the necessary partnership between tourism and heritage management, noting that the two sectors have different values and must be deliberately aligned. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and collaboration theory in tourism planning (Jamal & Getz, 1995) provide the basis for inclusive governance involving researchers, communities, public authorities and private operators.

Methodology

Research design

The study uses an interpretive, qualitative design appropriate for theory-building in an area where concepts are plural and context-dependent. The primary method is structured document analysis with thematic synthesis of (a) peer-reviewed literature and books on heritage, interpretation, authenticity, visitor experience and sustainable tourism, and (b) international policy and charter documents. The study is conceptual: it does not report new primary data. Instead, it synthesizes existing knowledge into a framework and specifies how the framework should be validated empirically.
Sources were identified through searches of major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and the websites of UNESCO, ICOMOS, UNWTO and the Council of Europe. Search strings combined terms such as "heritage tourism", "cultural heritage", "interpretation", "authenticity", "visitor experience", "sustainable tourism", "community participation" and "product development". The process followed the transparency principles of

systematic review reporting (Page et al., 2021), although the paper is a narrative rather than a full systematic review.

Sources were included if they (1) addressed cultural heritage in a tourism or visitor context, (2) offered theoretical, empirical or policy insight into authenticity, interpretation, experience, governance or sustainability, and (3) were foundational works or influential contributions in English. Sources were excluded if they dealt only with natural heritage without cultural dimensions, were purely promotional, or lacked methodological or conceptual transparency.

Thematic analysis followed the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Codes were developed inductively and then organized around the research questions. Five themes emerged and were then ordered into a process model.

Trustworthiness was supported through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported by drawing on multiple source types and disciplines. Transferability is supported by a thick description of the framework's components. Dependability and confirmability are supported by documenting the search and coding logic.

To address RQ4, the framework should be tested in a single destination or a small set of comparable heritage destinations using a **convergent mixed-methods design** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018):

1. **Qualitative strand.** Semi-structured interviews (suggested n = 20 to 30) with heritage researchers, museum and site managers, tourism operators, municipal officials and community representatives; participant observation of 3 to 5 existing heritage products; analysis of product descriptions and interpretive materials. Purposive and snowball sampling; saturation as the stopping rule.
2. **Quantitative strand.** A structured on-site or online visitor survey (suggested n of at least 300 for stable multivariate estimates) measuring perceived authenticity, interpretation quality, learning, emotional engagement, perceived value, satisfaction and revisit or recommendation intentions on five- or seven-point Likert scales adapted from existing validated instruments (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2010; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Analysis: descriptive statistics, reliability (Cronbach's alpha), exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis, and regression or structural equation modelling.
3. **Integration.** Findings from the two strands are compared in a joint display to see whether stakeholder views of product quality match visitor perceptions, and whether products designed with explicit research input score higher on authenticity and experience measures.

Qualitative or Quantitative Methods? A Justification

The choice between qualitative and quantitative approaches depends on the maturity of the theory and on the nature of the research question.

Dimension	Qualitative approach	Quantitative approach
Typical question	How and why are heritage meanings translated into products?	How strongly does interpretation quality affect satisfaction?
Data	Documents, interviews, observation, visual material	Structured survey, visitor counts, spending data
Strengths	Depth, context, discovery of new concepts, stakeholder voice	Generalizability, hypothesis testing, comparison between sites

Weaknesses	Limited generalization, researcher interpretation	Limited depth, risk of ignoring local meanings
Best for	Theory-building, process models, governance analysis	Theory-testing, measuring relationships and effects

Because the translation of heritage knowledge into products is a process involving values, negotiation and context, and because existing models remain fragmented, a qualitative design is the appropriate primary method for building the framework (RQ1 to RQ3). Testing the framework's predicted relationships (for example, that research-based interpretation increases perceived authenticity and thereby satisfaction) requires quantitative methods, and the most robust empirical design combines both (RQ4). This paper therefore carries out the qualitative stage and prescribes the quantitative stage for subsequent research.

Results

The results below are the outcome of the thematic synthesis. They are conceptual findings derived from the literature and policy documents and should be treated as propositions to be tested, not as measured empirical effects.

The literature consistently indicates that sustainable heritage products begin with a clear statement of significance: why a place, object or practice matters, to whom, and on what evidence. Research provides the evidence base (dating, provenance, functions, social context, contested histories). Products that rest on documented significance are better placed to deliver object authenticity, and they reduce reliance on unverified legends. Where intangible heritage is involved, the bearers' own account of significance is part of the evidence (UNESCO, 2003).

Research knowledge does not automatically become an experience. It must be selected, simplified without distortion, themed and narrated. Tilden's (1957) and Ham's (2013) principles, together with Moscardo's (1996) concept of mindfulness, suggest that effective products have a central theme, link to visitors' own lives, use multiple media (guiding, signage, digital tools, objects, performance) and invite active participation. A key finding is that interpretation is a distinct professional task that sits between the researcher and the tour operator, and that destinations that lack this "translator" role show the largest knowledge-to-experience gap.

Policy instruments and the stakeholder literature converge on the principle that communities should be partners in, not only subjects of, heritage tourism (Council of Europe, 2005; Jamal & Getz, 1995; ICOMOS, 2022). Participation improves the accuracy of interpretation, increases local benefit, and reduces conflict. Sustainable products show (a) clear agreements about what may and may not be shown or commercialized, (b) fair distribution of revenue, and (c) local employment and capacity building.

Using the experience-economy dimensions (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), products that combine educational, esthetic and, where appropriate, active participation elements (workshops, guided discovery, storytelling, tasting, craft practice) tend to be associated in the literature with higher perceived value and satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010). Importantly, the heritage tourist population is heterogeneous: Poria et al. (2003) show that visitors with a stronger personal connection seek depth, while casual visitors seek accessible, enjoyable encounters. Layered products (a short introduction, a deeper option, an expert-led option) can serve both.

Sustainability depends on managing the impacts of visitation. Butler's (1980) life-cycle logic and sustainable tourism principles imply the need for visitor flow management, conservation safeguards, seasonality strategies and monitoring indicators. A critical finding is the need for a feedback loop: monitoring data and visitor feedback should return to researchers and managers

so that interpretation and products are revised as knowledge, conditions and community views change.

The five themes are integrated into a six-stage chain:

1. **Research and documentation.** Collect, verify and archive heritage knowledge (including community knowledge) in accessible, open formats.
2. **Significance and risk assessment.** Define what is significant, to whom, what is fragile, and what must not be commercialized.
3. **Interpretation planning.** Translate knowledge into themes, stories and messages for defined audience segments, with expert review.
4. **Product and experience design.** Create tours, trails, museum programs, workshops, events, digital tools and local-product experiences using experience-design principles and clear quality standards.
5. **Governance and benefit sharing.** Establish partnerships, roles, training, pricing and revenue arrangements with communities and public and private actors.
6. **Delivery, monitoring and learning.** Operate the product, monitor visitor, environmental and community indicators, and feed results back into stage 1.

Base every narrative on documented evidence and state clearly where evidence is uncertain or contested.

- Appoint or train interpreters who can bridge research and tourism practice.
- Involve community representatives from the beginning, not at the promotion stage.
- Design layered experiences for different visitor depths of interest.
- Define limits of acceptable use and carrying capacity for each site or practice.
- Use monitoring indicators (visitor numbers and distribution, condition of the heritage asset, visitor satisfaction and learning, local income and community attitudes).
- Review products periodically against new research.

The framework yields testable propositions:

- **P1.** The degree of research-based content in a product is positively associated with visitors' perceived authenticity.
- **P2.** Interpretation quality mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and satisfaction.
- **P3.** Products developed through participatory governance show higher community support and more equitable benefit distribution.
- **P4.** Layered experience design increases satisfaction across visitor segments with different levels of heritage connection.
- **P5.** Products with active monitoring and feedback mechanisms maintain heritage condition and visitor satisfaction better over time.

Discussion

The synthesis suggests that the main obstacle to sustainable heritage tourism is not a lack of heritage or of research, but a lack of translation capacity and governance structures. This reinforces McKercher and du Cros's (2002) argument that heritage management and tourism are different cultures requiring deliberate partnership. It also extends their work by placing interpretation and experience design explicitly between research and product, and by adding a feedback loop to link operations back to research.

The constructivist view of authenticity (Wang, 1999) might be read as a license for free invention. The framework resists this by keeping evidence-based significance as the starting point while accepting that visitors experience authenticity partly through personal connection and participation. This balance allows creative products (storytelling, reenactment, digital

reconstruction) provided they are transparent about what is documented and what is imaginative.

A key implication is that sustainability is produced by decisions at each stage of the chain rather than by a separate environmental or economic check at the end. Stage 2 protects cultural integrity, stage 5 supports social and economic sustainability, and stage 6 supports environmental and physical conservation. This integrated reading is consistent with the multidimensional definitions in the sustainable tourism literature (Bramwell & Lane, 1993).

For destination managers, the framework suggests investing in heritage documentation, interpretation training and monitoring, not only in marketing and infrastructure. For researchers, it suggests producing outputs in accessible formats (summaries, thematic briefs, image and data banks) and engaging with product developers. For tourism businesses, it offers a path to differentiation through credible, distinctive content. For communities, it clarifies the conditions for fair participation. For policy makers, it supports funding schemes that link research projects with product pilots.

Limitations and future research

The study is conceptual and relies on secondary sources, so its propositions are not yet empirically verified. The source selection was limited mainly to English-language literature and may under-represent regional, non-Western and local-language perspectives. Context matters: the relative weight of the themes will differ between, for example, a UNESCO-listed archaeological site, a living craft tradition and an urban historic quarter. Future research should (a) apply the mixed-methods protocol in several destinations, (b) test the mediation and moderation relationships in P1 to P5, (c) examine digital technologies (augmented reality, virtual reconstruction, digital storytelling) in the translation process, and (d) study how contested or dissonant heritage can be interpreted responsibly.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that turning heritage research into sustainable tourism products is a deliberate, staged process rather than a by-product of tourism growth. Through a qualitative thematic synthesis, it identified five core themes (significance and authenticity, interpretation, community participation, experience design, and capacity management with monitoring) and integrated them into a six-stage Heritage-to-Experience Value Chain with practical design principles and testable propositions. The central message is that research gains public and economic value when it is interpreted and designed for visitors, and that tourism gains authenticity and long-term viability when it is grounded in research and shared governance. The proposed mixed-methods protocol offers a route to empirical validation. By closing the gap between those who study heritage and those who deliver heritage experiences, destinations can create products that educate visitors, benefit communities and safeguard heritage for future generations.

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