



## EXAMINING TOURISTS' INTENTIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN TEA TOURISM AN EMERGING MARKET CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

Tea tourism, a growing niche segment within the broader realm of culinary and cultural tourism, has gained prominence as an emerging market opportunity. This study investigates the factors influencing tourists' intentions towards tea tourism. The research uses the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework, incorporating variables like destination credibility, authenticity, destination image, attitude and an intention to visit tea tourism destinations. Data from 392 domestic tourists were analyzed using structural equation modelling (CB-SEM). Key findings underscore the importance of factors such as destination image, tea-related knowledge and prior tea tourism experiences in shaping tourists' intentions. This research not only contributes to the emerging tea tourism market but also offers valuable insights for destination marketers, policymakers and tea industry stakeholders. Understanding these influencing factors can help tailor marketing strategies and offers to make tea tourism destinations more appealing, thus supporting sustainable growth in this burgeoning industry. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the preferences of tourists seeking immersive tea experiences and guides efforts to develop and promote tea-related tourism experiences effectively.

### KEYWORDS

attitude, destination, infrastructure, small tea growers, sustainability

### ARTICLE INFORMATION DETAILS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tea has evolved into one of the most consumed daily beverages, and is capable of embodying and showcasing local culture, historical significance and established customs (Chen et al., 2021; Jolliffe, 2006). Tea holds the

distinction of being the second most globally consumed beverage (Dhiman et al., 2023; Shen & Chen, 2008), and it gains significant attention owing to its numerous merits, including aromatic qualities, fragrance, flavour, and its potential positive impact on mental states (Brzezicha-Cirocka et al., 2016; Dhiman et al., 2023).



Numerous scholarly investigations have delineated the tourist activities stemming from tea-related traditions and consumption, coining the term “tea tourism” to describe this phenomenon (Jolliffe, 2007). By 2027, the ready-to-drink tea and coffee market is predicted to reach a value of 153.19 billion USD (GlobeNewswire, 2022). Tea tourism is emerging as a new form of tourism because of the spread of tea-drinking customs and cultures around the world (Zhou et al., 2016).

In order to create sustainable community livelihoods, tea production, and its consumption, have been integrated into tourism over time (Su, Wall & Wang, 2019; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). Studies have been conducted in the past by integrating tea and tourism in various contexts (Liang & Lai, 2022; Shen & Chou, 2022). The academic literature has investigated tea tourism as a specialist tourism category which is still in its infancy with modest levels of tourists in most tea-growing regions. Research from an Asian perspective delivers insights into this form of tourism which offers experiential travel (Jolliffe, 2022). As an “alternative form” of tourism, tea tourism is acknowledged as an instrument for socio-economic development (Su, Wall & Wang, 2019; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). In addition to providing income, tea tourism has promoted cultural heritage and social cohesion. Tea plays a significant role in the culture of nations such as India and Sri Lanka, and also holds great importance in the realm of tourism. Furthermore, tea has taken a variety of forms in different cultures (Jolliffe, 2007). Therefore, previous research established tea as a strong area of research as tea traditions combine tourists with cultural heritage (Bohne, 2021). Furthermore, tea cultivation plays an important role in reducing the impact of urbanization and strengthening biodiversity (Wu et al., 2023).

It has also strengthened the rural economy through social and infrastructure enhancements (Casalegno et al., 2019; Magar & Kar, 2016). Although tea tourism has been suggested as an alternative business for small tea growers by various research scholars, academic literature is lacking on this front. Tea tourism is growing in India (Sarmah, 2020; Solak & Amin, 2020) but this form of niche tourism needs time and proper planning to develop. While China, India and Sri Lanka collectively account for 65% of global tea production, it is important to note that tea cultivation extends to approximately 40 countries, including Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], n.d.). Prior research on tea tourism has predominantly concentrated on destinations such as Bangladesh (Sultana & Khan, 2018), China (Cheng et al., 2010), Indonesia (Purwadi, 2016), Korea (Sohn et al., 2014), Sri Lanka (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009), Taiwan (Lin & Wu, 2016) and Vietnam (Nam & Thien, 2019). India ranks second, and Turkey fifth in

global tea production according to FAO 2019 statistics. However, there has been limited exploration of tea tourism in these regions. Yılmaz and Kumar Dixit (2023) revealed that in Assam, there are specialized tea tourism tours, promoting it as a central tourism theme. In contrast, the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey integrates tea-related experiences into broader cultural tours, with its primary attraction being cultural. This highlights the distinct nature of tea tourism in Assam within the broader tourism spectrum.

Based on the arguments above, it can be inferred that tea production and consumption have a great deal of potential to be combined with tourism. From scholarly studies, newer opportunities for tea tourist experiences necessitate collaboration with tourism-related businesses (Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). Previous studies have attempted to highlight the issues linked with the processing and marketing of tea (Biggs et al., 2018; Haq & Boz, 2020; Munasinghe et al., 2017; Qiao et al., 2018). Although general agricultural sustainability and the long-term sustainable production of tea have also been studied (Deka et al., 2022), a gap still exists in the literature as no previous study has covered the possible integration of tea and tourism in the context of a developing nation like India which makes a significant contribution to its production. Global production surpasses 17 billion USD annually, with the tea trade valued at approximately 9.5 billion USD, contributing significantly to export revenue. Per capita tea consumption worldwide has grown by 2.5 percent over the past decade, driven by increased consumption in tea-producing nations, particularly in developing and emerging economies. The surge in demand is notable in East Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Near East, while well-established European markets and advanced nations have witnessed a decline. Global tea production reached an estimated 6.5 million tonnes in 2021, with China contributing 47 percent, India is the second-largest producer, and with a rebound in black tea production in major tea-producing countries. Global tea consumption grew at an annual rate of 3.5 percent over the past decade, reaching approximately 6.4 million tonnes in 2021, driven by strong demand in China, India and other emerging economies. Import demand in traditional tea-importing markets like the European Union, the United States and Canada remained subdued, compensated by robust growth in producing countries in Africa and Asia. Anticipated significant growth in tea consumption is expected in various producing countries including Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (FAO, 2022).

According to available literature, most research is limited to identifying challenges and other critical issues related to the development of tea tourism. Notably, the existing literature focuses on broader perspectives

which are difficult to generalize. Despite the substantial body of research on various forms of beverage tourism such as wine (Getz & Brown, 2006), coffee (Lyon, 2013), beer (Kraftchick et al., 2014) and whisky (McBoyle & McBoyle, 2008), tea tourism remains relatively unexplored in the academic literature. Research on tea-tourism covering the psychological aspects of individuals is not available. To address the gap, the present study uses the validated stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model to show the intentions of tourists to visit a tea-tourism destination. Based on the arguments above, the following research questions can be investigated:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are domestic tourists' intentions to visit a tea tourism destination?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Do attitudes have a significant role to play in determining tourists' intentions?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1. STIMULUS-ORGANISM-RESPONSE THEORY (S-O-R THEORY)

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) proposed stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) theory, which claims that when people are exposed to a stimulus (S), cognitive and affective internal states (O) are generated, consequentially activating their responses (R). Individuals' internal states, in other words, influence the input on their subsequent behavioural reactions (Lee et al., 2011). In the context of tourism, researchers have examined how a shopping/destination environment influences visitors' reactions and subsequent behaviour covering different tourism settings (Chang et al., 2014; Hew et al., 2018; Manthiou et al., 2017). S-O-R provides a comprehensive and concise framework for integrating cognitions and emotions in response to external stimuli in order to explain resulting behaviours (Su et al., 2020). The applicability of S-O-R has been established in a range of other contexts including tourism-related pro-environmental studies, environmental psychology and consumer behaviour (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022; Sachin & Kılıçlar, 2022; Su & Swanson, 2017). An analysis of linkages between tourists' environmentally responsible behaviour (TERB) as a response to destination image and place attachment (as an organism) and destination credibility (as an extrinsic stimulus) is achieved using the S-O-R theory (Qiu et al., 2022). Taking into consideration that S-O-R theory plays a significant role in determining the intentions of tourists and other evaluations based on their subjective behaviour, the current study employs the S-O-R model to underline tourists' intentions.

#### 2.1.1. DESTINATION SOURCE CREDIBILITY (DSC)

Destination source credibility (DSC) is belief in the ability of destination management to deliver its promises (Veasna et al., 2013). Destination source credibility is crucial in forming tourists' opinions and attitudes (Roostika & Muafi, 2014). Although judged by visitors, it is an objective destination characteristic which is mostly subject to outside indications (Girish et al., 2021). Destination source credibility has a significant effect on both affective and cognitive images of a destination (Rahman et al., 2021) and has a major impact on TERB. Therefore, it is assumed that DSC impacts destination image and attitude. Hence based on the arguments above, the study proposes:

H<sub>1</sub>: Destination source credibility has a positive influence on destination image.

H<sub>2</sub>: Destination source credibility has a positive influence on tourists' attitudes.

#### 2.1.2. AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE (AE)

Authenticity is considered to be a judgement, meaning or belief created through a tourist and a location, and it refers to an original, 'behind-the-scenes' reality of an object (Adams, 1984). When it comes to tourism promoting cultural heritage, Lu et al. (2016) have validated the beneficial effects of authentic tourism experiences on travellers' emotive and cognitive impressions of a place. In the tourism industry this includes developing tourists' feeling of authenticity and examining the effects of authentic experiences (Lee & Chang, 2017). Additionally, empirical research has shown that genuine travel experiences can deepen visitors' attachment to a place (Jiang et al., 2016; Lee, Busser & Yang, 2015), and place attachment influences how travellers perceive destinations on both cognitive and emotional levels (Stylos et al., 2017). A person's connection to knowledge of and feelings about a particular thing might be viewed as being an authentic experience (Selwyn, 1996). Researchers have assessed authentic experience using existential and object-based methods (Kolar & Zabkar 2010; Lee & Chang, 2017; Lee, Fu & Chang, 2015). From the arguments, it can be said that authentic experience plays a crucial role in portraying a positive image of a destination and thereby impacting visitors' attitudes and intentions. Hence, the following hypotheses:

H<sub>3</sub>: Authentic experience has a positive influence on destination image.

H<sub>4</sub>: Authentic experience has a positive influence on tourists' attitudes.

H<sub>5</sub>: Authentic experience has a positive influence on tourists' intentions to visit a tea tourism destination.

### 2.1.3. DESTINATION IMAGE (DI)

The term “tourism destination image” shows how tourists perceive particular aspects of a destination, such as infrastructure, hospitality environment and a destination’s distinctive cultural attractions (Cardoso et al., 2019; Chen & Tsai, 2007). The affective and cognitive components of a destination are covered by destination image and represent concepts and perspectives about a place that elicit feelings and emotions, ultimately generating behavioural intentions (Tasci et al., 2022). Several works have looked at and verified the effect of destination image on a range of behaviours including, pre-, post- and while visiting a place (Kim et al., 2019; Wang & Hsu, 2010). A destination with a favourable image is more likely to be chosen (Tan & Wu, 2016). As a result, the decision to travel to a certain location and the intention to do so seem to depend on how the location is seen by tourists. Consequently, the hypothesis that follows is:

H<sub>5</sub>: Destination image has a positive impact on tourists’ intentions to visit a tea tourism destination.

### 2.1.4. ATTITUDE (ATT)

The degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable opinion or appraisal of an activity is described by the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) as an attitude toward behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). People are more eager to engage in a behaviour when they have a positive attitude toward it (Ajzen, 2001). When tourists engage in particular behaviours, their psychological tendencies, positive or negative, are conveyed through their attitudes (Ajzen, 1991; Kraus, 1995; Schiffman & Kanuk, 1994). The association between tourists’ attitudes toward their destination and their intention to visit it has received empirical confirmation from the literature (Loureiro, 2015). Some scholarly studies (Doosti et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Qiu et al., 2020) revealed a favourable association between tourists’ attitudes and their intentions to visit a destination. Considering this, the following hypothesis is presented:

H<sub>6</sub>: Tourists’ attitudes have a positive impact on their intentions to visit tea tourism destinations.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

In the light of the presented discussion and existing scholarly literature, the authors present a research framework as delineated in Figure 1. Within this framework, destination source credibility (DSC) and authentic experience are posited as the stimulus variables, while destination image (DI) and attitude

(ATT) are conceptualized as research variables. The anticipated outcome in this investigation is an intention to visit tea tourism destinations (ITT), serving as the response variable. The study elucidates the interrelationships among these constructs and delves into the practical implications for these stakeholder relationships.

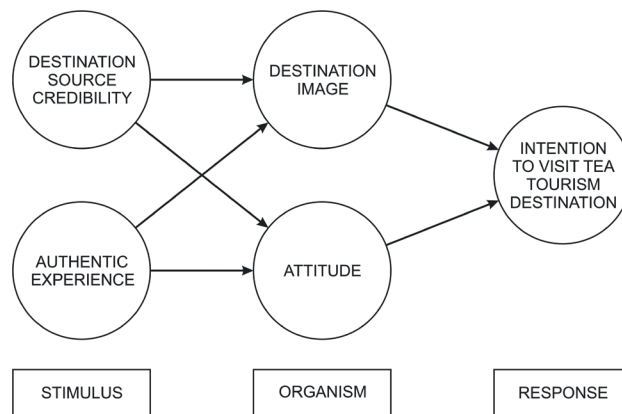


Figure 1. Research framework  
Source: authors

### 3.1. SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

A structured questionnaire was used to test the relationships in the proposed model. The study’s online questionnaire was derived from previously validated measures in the literature, with a few statements changed for research purposes. There are two sections to the questionnaire: the first contains demographic data about respondents of the target population, such as age, gender, income, occupation and purpose of visit; the second contains questionnaire items that use five variables to find out the intentions of domestic tourists to visit tea tourism destinations in India using a five-point Likert scale.

For this study, the target population was Indian domestic tourists. Kolkata’s Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport departure area was used as an intercept location to gather responses from domestic tourists who were traveling to Bagdogra, the nearest airport to Darjeeling, as this region produces the most famous tea in India and can be treated as a tea tourism destination. This method was adopted because it provides the highest response rate and responses were collected directly from the airport. Respondents were chosen within the departure gates and lounge area of the airport over a five-day period. Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire to enhance its precision and relevance. The selection of participants employed a convenience sampling method due to rapidity, simplicity, accessibility and cost-effectiveness. In cases where individuals declined to participate, replacements were sought before proceeding to the next sampling event (Gupta et al., 2018;

Gupta et al., 2020). Multiple techniques were used to eliminate biases, replacing inaccurate or misdirected responses with representative approximations based on the data obtained (Keeble et al., 2015). Following the recommendations, researchers used a 95% confidence level to determine the appropriate sample size (Burns et al., 1995).

### 3.2. SAMPLE SIZE

Utilizing information released by the government of India, the sample size for the current study was established. The number of domestic tourists visiting West Bengal during 2021 was 24 million thus contributing 3.6% to the total domestic tourist inflow in India (Ministry of Tourism Government of India, 2021). Keeping in mind the number of tourists visiting the state, researchers considered the recommendations of Cochran (1977) to fix the sample size for a large and finite population. The appropriate sample size for the study was found to be 385 (the confidence level was set at 95% and the margin of error kept at 5%). Keeping to an upper limit, the final sample size reached was 392. For this purpose, the researchers approached 767 tourists, thereby aggregating a response rate at 51%. The data for the research was collected from April 2022 to December 2022. The respondents' demographic profiles are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents

Demographic variable		n (392)	Percentage
Gender	male	233	59.4
	female	159	40.5
Age	18–25	41	10.4
	26–35	87	22.1
	36–50	166	42.3
	more than 50	98	25.0
Purpose of visit	work	182	46.42
	vacation	210	53.57

Source: authors.

### 3.3. SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Out of the 392 responses collected for this field study, 233 (59.4%) were male and 159 (40.5%) were female. The respondents were all adults, and the age group with the highest percentages was 36 to 50 years old (42.3%), followed by more than 50 (25%) and 18 to 25 (10.4%). This survey also looked at the tourists' purpose of visiting, and it was discovered that 210 (53.57%) of them were on vacation and 182 (46.42%) for work.

### 3.4. DATA RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The factor loadings for each item were considered to determine convergent validity. We followed suggestions given by Barclay et al. (1995) and Chin (1998) for threshold values related to individual item factor loadings. Furthermore, this study also established convergent validity using average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) as recommended by previous research (Aibinu et al., 2011). As can be seen in Table 2, the measures of convergent reliability are well within threshold limits. The square root of AVE (Table 3) has a higher value than correlations with other latent variables, thus establishing discriminant validity. The recommendations of scholarly studies were considered to corroborate our analysis of these measures (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2010; Litwin, 1995).

Table 2. Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE)

Factors	Items	$\lambda$	CR	AVE
Destination source credibility	DSC_1	0.800	0.873	0.579
	DSC_2	0.741		
	DSC_3	0.733		
	DSC_4	0.815		
	DSC_5	0.709		
Authentic experience	AE_1	0.699	0.839	0.567
	AE_2	0.717		
	AE_3	0.836		
	AE_4	0.752		
Destination image	DI_1	0.641	0.838	0.509
	DI_2	0.704		
	DI_3	0.697		
	DI_4	0.734		
	DI_5	0.785		
Attitude	ATT_1	0.811	0.856	0.598
	ATT_2	0.710		
	ATT_3	0.729		
	ATT_4	0.836		
Intention to visit	INT_1	0.719	0.863	0.613
	INT_2	0.852		
	INT_3	0.736		
	INT_4	0.818		

Source: authors.

Table 3. Discriminant validity

Construct	DSC	AE	DI	ATT	INT
DSC	0.760	–	–	–	–
AE	0.312	0.752	–	–	–
DI	0.186	0.313	0.713	–	–
ATT	0.014	0.171	0.320	0.773	–
INT	0.133	0.325	0.361	0.215	0.782

Note: DSC – destination source credibility, AE – authentic experience, DI – destination image, ATT – attitude, INT – intention to visit.

Source: authors.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. GOODNESS OF FIT ASSESSMENT

The measurement model and the structural model were examined using CB-SEM (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The measurement model was validated through an assessment of reliability and validity (convergent and discriminant). As can be seen in Table 4, the study assessed measurement and structural models based on threshold values determined through previous studies.

Table 4. Model-fit summary statistics

Indices	Source (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Kline, 2005; Hair et al., 2010)	Measurement model values	Structural model values
$\chi^2/df$	less than 3	1.98	2.09
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	greater than 0.90	0.96	0.98
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)	greater than 0.80	0.88	0.91
Comparative fit index (CFI)	greater than 0.90	0.91	0.93
Normed fit index (NFI)	greater than 0.90	0.94	0.94
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	less than 0.08	0.05	0.06

Source: authors.

#### 4.2. MODEL ANALYSIS

The findings concerning the proposed hypothesis are shown in Table 5. As it can be seen, the paths: DSC → DI ( $\beta = 0.206, t = 3.122$ ), DSC → ATT ( $\beta = 0.108, t = 1.037$ ), AE → DI ( $\beta = 0.171, t = 3.855$ ), AE → ATT ( $\beta = 0.392, t = 6.146$ ), DI → INT ( $\beta = 0.133, t = 2.033$ ), ATT → INT ( $\beta = 0.200, t = 5.119$ ) were significantly related to the intention to visit a tea tourism destination and supported the hypotheses H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4</sub>, H<sub>5</sub> and H<sub>6</sub> respectively. Whereas AE → INT ( $\beta = 0.011, t = 0.440$ ) was found not significant (H<sub>7</sub>) and the hypothesis was not supported.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	SE	t-value	Result
H <sub>1</sub>	DSC → DI	0.206	0.041	3.122***	supported
H <sub>2</sub>	DSC → ATT	0.108	0.033	1.037*	supported
H <sub>3</sub>	AE → DI	0.171	0.032	3.855***	supported

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	SE	t-value	Result
H <sub>4</sub>	AE → ATT	0.392	0.029	6.146***	supported
H <sub>5</sub>	DI → INT	0.133	0.040	2.033**	supported
H <sub>6</sub>	ATT → INT	0.200	0.035	5.119***	supported
H <sub>7</sub>	AE → INT	0.011	0.037	0.440	not supported

Note: DSC – destination source credibility, DI – destination image, ATT – attitude, AE – authentic experience, INT – intention to visit.

$p \leq 0.05, ** p \leq 0.01, *** p \leq 0.001$ .

Source: authors.

#### 4.3. TESTING THE MEDIATING EFFECT

The implications of the predictor variable’s direct and indirect impacts on the dependent variable were assessed through a breakdown of the links between the variables in order to determine mediation analysis (Table 6). According to Baron and Kenny’s (1986) approach, researchers examined mediation effects and used a four stage methodology. First, the dependent variable should be impacted by the independent or explanatory variable. Authentic experience (AE), according to the study model, had a significant and direct influence on intention to travel to a tea tourism destination (0.037\*\*). Second, the mediator should allow the independent variable to have an effect on the dependent variable. Thirdly, the dependent variable must be affected by the mediator. The research revealed a significant (0.0708\*\*\*) indirect effect of authentic experience on intention through attitude and because of this it is possible to see the full mediation of the effect of authentic experience.

Table 6. Mediating effects estimates

Path	Direct effects	Direct effects with mediator	Indirect effects	Result
AE → ATT → INT	0.037**	0.011 <sup>ns</sup>	0.078***	full mediation

Note: AE – authentic experience, ATT – attitude, INT – intention to visit.

<sup>ns</sup> – not significant.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05$ .

Source: authors.

### 5. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study explores tourists’ intentions to visit a tea tourism destination using S-O-R theory as the underlying framework. Local cuisine and beverages

play a significant role in co-creating enduring travel experiences (Mawroh & Dixit, 2022; Uehara & Assarut, 2020). Contemporary tourists allocate a substantial portion of their travel budgets to expenses related to food and beverages (Vodeb & Rudež, 2017). Tea consumption and its associated cultural significance are acknowledged as vital elements of gastronomic attraction, as products and as culinary heritage. Travelers often seek opportunities to immerse themselves in the world of tea, explore its culture, and visit the natural, historical and cultural sites in their chosen holiday destinations (Chen et al., 2021; Fernando et al., 2016; Sohn et al., 2014). Furthermore, tea has the potential to provide tourists with memorable and enjoyable travel experiences (Jolliffe, 2007; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). Consequently, destinations offer tea and tea-related products as dedicated tourist attractions or experiences to cater to their interests.

Additionally, the research investigated the role of destination image and attitude as an organism where attitude has played the role of mediator in influencing the intention of tourists to visit tea tourism destinations. The model used in the study is distinctive in nature and has taken two different stimuli, i.e. destination credibility and authentic experience. The empirical findings indicate that authentic experience is directly significant in influencing the tourists' intentions to visit tea tourism destinations.

The current study established five variables which were empirically confirmed using CFA and EFA: destination credibility, authentic experience, destination image, attitude and intention to visit tea tourist destinations. Regarding the relationship between the constructs, SEM results revealed that just one of the two factors – intention to travel to a tea tourism site and authentic experience – has a negligible impact on that intention. Intention is significantly and positively impacted by all the other factors.

Both the destination image and attitude toward the destination were significantly impacted by the credibility of the destination. The finding is consistent with earlier academic research findings (Girish et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2020). Hence, the results of the present study clearly indicate that a credible information source or endorsement of destinations from trusted individuals impacts attitude and also improves the image of the destination within tourist communities. The study revealed that authentic experience is significantly associated with destination image. These results corroborate with findings of (Lu et al., 2016) and (Shi et al., 2019) highlighting the impact of authentic tourism experiences on tourists' impressions of a particular place. This implies that an authentic experience including culture, food and meaningful experiences would have a long-lasting

impression on the minds of tourists which would lead to the development of a positive image in their minds.

Furthermore, the study endorsed the perception that destination image (DI) positively influences tourists' desire to travel. The findings show destination image as important since it influences tourists' decisions in a significant way. Previous research on destination image has been conducted in various settings, including natural and cultural destinations and urban (Gössling & Scott, 2009). Hence, this study corroborates the results of scholarly research on the role of destination image in determining intention (Khan et al., 2017; Prayogo et al., 2016; Whang et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2020). Attitudes of tourists can differ with experience although the change can be very slight (Pizam et al., 2002). As claimed by the previous study results (Zhou et al., 2023), favourable and noteworthy interpersonal engagements were found to significantly shape tourists' attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Surprisingly, authentic experience was found to have no significant association with the intention of tourists. As research has discovered that authentic travel experiences can develop attachment to destinations (Jiang et al., 2016; Lee, Busser & Yang, 2015), this result is an exception to these studies. The reason for the lack of significance of the relationship can be attributed to the lack of promotion and available resources to enhance tourists' experience at tea destinations.

The mediation test revealed the full effect of attitude which signifies that it influences how likely people are to choose a destination for tea tourism and how real their experiences are. It can be inferred that the host community and the tourism sector should offer satisfying authentic experiences to help tourists form positive opinions about tea tourism destinations, which will eventually result in an intention to travel.

## 5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has various implications for marketers, policymakers and local governing bodies. One of the major successes this study has achieved is in terms of getting a detailed insight into the role of the S-O-R model in determining the intentions of tourists to participate in tea tourism in the Indian context. Since tea tourism is closely associated with socioeconomics and can help alleviate livelihoods, current research can be considered a pioneer in this regard. Though, previous studies have extensively explored the intentions and subsequent behaviour of tourists towards tourist destinations including food and beverages (Lai et al., 2020; Liang & Lai, 2022; Ulfy et al., 2021), working on the same theme, this research has attempted to explore the potential of tea tourism in the context of a developing nation using the highly tested and validated S-O-R framework.

In addition, by employing SEM, this study tested the relationships and came out with findings that have the potential to be generalized. This adds to the existing theory and body of knowledge as a destination's image has a lot of potential to attract tourists in present times as the world is emerging from a deadly pandemic. Furthermore, the study has explored variables like destination credibility and authentic experience which are not only relevant but have not been explored in this specific context. To add to the implications, this study is unique and one of its kind in the Indian context as its findings can be replicated in other related destinations involving food and beverages.

## 5.2. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study findings have various practical implications, and the results carry the potential to be used by policymakers and marketers. Most of the research conducted in the tourism domain nowadays is focused on tourists and green generations (Yeap et al., 2021), as they are at the center of all economic activities. The world nowadays is struggling to bring tourists back to pre-COVID times, and the relationships demonstrated in the study have significant implications. Therefore, firms involved in marketing destinations, government bodies, and other agencies should consider the role of the variables destination credibility, authentic experience, destination image, attitude and intention in relating a tourist with a destination.

Additionally, it may be inferred from study results that destination credibility and destination image are associated. It signifies that branding efforts and marketing strategies employed by the tourism board and tourist agencies significantly impact and help to improve the image of a destination. It can also be added that trust in a source that is involved in the marketing of a destination plays a vital role. Therefore, it can be suggested that for tea destinations and their promotions, government websites, hoardings sponsored by the tourism board and promotions by trustworthy partners could improve the image of destinations amongst tourists. Tourism development boards could effectively leverage the advantage of obsessions with celebrities and the way they feel personally connected to generate authenticity in the promotional content. Furthermore, the significant relationship between authentic experience and destination image highlights the role of the immersive experience of tourists in developing a favourable image. Marketers should promote tour packages which include bundled activities, stays and local cuisines to develop a feeling of distinct experience amongst visiting tourists. The role played by destination credibility and authentic experience in determining tourists' attitudes showcases their potential to impact intentions.

It is pertinent to mention here that the dominant role of attitude is reflected through significant associations. Positive attitude formation amongst potential tourists is of huge importance as it not only is directed towards intentions but also due to its role as a mediator. The mediating effect also revealed that attitude fully mediates between authentic experience and intention to visit. This also strengthens the claim that attitude has a bigger role to play in determining tourists' intentions. Therefore, it is suggested that various stakeholders should take into consideration launching initiatives targeting the favourable attitudes of tourists. This includes an environment of safety, security and transparency. Additionally, at the local level, authorities should train and make local vendors, taxi operators, guides and restaurant and hotel owners aware and encourage them to develop and maintain a positive attitude towards tea-based destinations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research is a breakthrough in determining tourists' intentions to visit a destination with tea as its centre. The current study adds novel insights into the existing understanding of researchers and policymakers towards tea tourism. The insights revealed that tourists give due consideration to credible information sources to develop a favourable attitude and to sketch a positive image of the destination before deciding to travel. Also, the study indicated that attitude is at the centre of all tourism-related activities. If the tourists develop a positive attitude towards tea tourism, then it will lead to intentions among tourists to travel to these tea tourism destinations. This is possible through positive word of mouth, promotions and other activities. However, the findings revealed that authentic experience do not lead to the direct development of intentions. Tourists' intentions in this case are routed through the mediation of attitude. This enhances the importance of tourists' attitudes towards authentic experiences as it acts as a catalyst in drawing tourists towards tea-based destinations. This research further revealed the positive role of destination image and attitude in developing intentions towards tea tourism destinations. The current study advocates blending authenticity with better infrastructure to boost tourism in a sustainable and profitable way. The research therefore, strongly advocates the development of tea tourism-based destinations as it would not only connect the intangibles (culture and heritage) with tangibles (tea-based products), but rather could act as a catalyst in the all-around development of the region.



## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like any other research, this study has its limitations. Firstly, quantitative research was conducted, but a qualitative analysis would give a more thorough understanding of the same. Another drawback was that it only included responses from local tourists, and this contributed to some bias in the results. For tea tourism destinations, the opinions of foreign tourists will also have a significant impact and aid businesses and the local population in developing marketing plans to draw in more visitors. Future studies should include a more varied sample of local tourists since they will offer more unbiased feedback from various perspectives. Conceptually, the current model could be strengthened by examining future hypotheses that were not explored in this investigation. The constructs of the conceptual framework proposed in the S-O-R model can be altered and tested empirically. Future research could test the existing conceptual framework in tourist locations in India or in other nations. Future research may include additional mediators or moderating variables, such as risk perception and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and experimentally test them in various demographics, or the same model can be used to test the dimensions for religious, wildlife, wine and heritage tourism.

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