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**Can tourist engagement enhance tourist behavioural intentions?  
A combination of PLS-SEM and fsQCA approaches**

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# **Can tourist engagement enhance tourist behavioural intentions? A combination of PLS-SEM and fsQCA approaches**

## **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the effects of tourist engagement dimensions on revisit and word of mouth (WOM) intentions of heritage tourists. The data were collected from domestic tourists in the heritage city of Kashan, Iran. To analyse the collected data, this study applies Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as a symmetric analysis technique, as well as fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) as an asymmetric analysis approach to strengthen the findings. The findings of PLS-SEM showed the significant effect of the absorption dimension on revisit intention, whereas these results demonstrated the significant effects of the dimensions of interaction, and identification on WOM intention. However, the results of fsQCA identified more heterogeneous combinations of dimensions of visitor engagement to predict revisit and WOM intentions. Overall, this study contributes to the extant literature on tourist engagement by constructing a composite picture of tourist engagement dimensions on the behavioral intentions of heritage tourists. The study's theoretical contributions, its restrictions and practical implications for heritage site operators are further discussed.

**Keywords:** Tourist engagement; revisit intention; WOM intention; heritage tourism; behavioral intentions

## **1. Introduction**

Consumer engagement in the creation and production of new goods and services has proactively been pursued by firms as a key element for securing a sustainable competitive advantage in the growing fierce marketplace (Hollebeek, 2011). The concept of consumer engagement has been examined and conceptualized in several disciplines such as psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, marketing (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2010) and tourism (e.g. Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; Teng, 2020).

In tourism, the concept of tourist engagement towards a tourism destination has been viewed as a key influential element in relation to tourist loyalty and subsequent behavioral intentions (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012; Harrigan et al., 2017). Thus, creating tourist engagement is an essential part in establishing sustainable relations with tourists and fostering a long-term business performance. Brodie et al. (2011) argue that higher levels of tourist engagement with a destination positively affects tourist attitude and thereby increasing their behavioural intentions towards a destination. The role of tourist engagement in tourism experiences and behaviour has also been acknowledged by several studies (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Rather et al., 2019; Teng, 2020). The studies of Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019) and Alrawadieh et al. (2019) reveal that tourist engagement has a positive relationship with destination loyalty and revisit intentions. Furthermore, several studies also suggested a positive relationship between the visitor engagement during the visit and the enhanced memorable experiences (Bapiri et al., 2021; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2020).

While such studies highlight the significant role of engagement in shaping tourist experience and subsequently tourism development in a destination, the effects of tourism engagement dimensions on behavioural intentions of heritage tourists have not adequately been addressed in the extant literature. This emphasizes the need for further inquiry to gain a better and broader understanding of heritage tourists' experiences and to advance understanding of engagement in a heritage tourism setting. Therefore, to fill this gap, the current study aims to investigate the effects of different dimensions of visitor engagement on behavioral intentions including revisit and Word of Mouth (WOM) intentions using both symmetric and asymmetric approaches to get deeper insights. This study therefore contributes to the extant literature on tourist engagement by constructing a composite picture of tourist engagement dimensions on the behavioral intentions of heritage tourists. The results derived from the current study can also assist heritage site marketers and operators in designing successful marketing strategies for tourism destinations by establishing or improving a tourist engagement which motivates subsequent behavioural intentions.

## **2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses development**

### ***2.1. Theoretical framework***

This research focuses on the relationship between cognitive factors (i.e., tourist engagement) (Bryce et al., 2015; Harrigan et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2019) and conative factors such as word-of-mouth (WOM) and revisit intention (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Agapito et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2018). The framework of this study is conceptualised based on the cognitive-affective-conative model for explaining attitude proposed by Fishbein (1967). This model has been utilised in many previous studies to investigate user engagement (Bryce et al., 2015; Harrigan et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020), behavioural intention (Han et al., 2011) and WOM communications (Harrigan et al., 2017; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008).

The hierarchical nature of the relationship between cognitive, affective and conative dimensions in the context of destination image was tested and confirmed by Agapito et al. (2013) validating that conative image is the consequence of cognitive image. Fu (2019) investigated the effect of cognitive loyalty on conative loyalty in heritage tourism. Similarly, Yuksel et al. (2010) hypothesized that cognitive loyalty influences conative loyalty. Besides of cognitive-affective-conative model, in their conceptual model, So et al. (2014) argue that behavioural intention is the outcome variable of customer engagement including identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction. This argument is confirmed by another study conducted by Harrigan et al. (2017). Moreover, based on the same concept, Koenig-Lewis et al. (2021) argued that behavioural intention is an outcome of visitor engagement in cultural festivals.

### ***2.2. Hypothesis development***

Based on the above discussion, we conceptualised the effect of tourist engagement on behavioural intentions such as revisit and world-of-mouth intentions which are the focus of this study or as illustrated in Figure 1. As such, the following subsections of the paper provide the descriptions and justifications of the constructs and their propositions included in the model.

#### ***2.2.1. Tourist engagement***

The concept of tourist engagement originated from that of customer engagement (Huang & Choi, 2019), which involves customers' commitment and interactions. Engagement concept was introduced by psychological research and has been the focus of extensive research in several disciplines including psychology, sociology, marketing and organizational behavior (Brodie et al., 2011), communication (Campbell & Kwak, 2010), and educational science (Fredricks et al., 2004). Marketing Science Institute has defined consumer engagement as "customers' behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm beyond purchase, which results from motivational drivers including WOM activity, recommendations, customer-to-customer interactions, blogging, writing reviews, and other similar activities" (So et al., 2014, p306).

Engagement is a critical instrument in environments with high degrees of tourists interactions, where greater levels of engagement may improve the entire tourist experiences (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Taheri et al., 2014). Tourist engagement has recently been under increasing academic scrutiny in hospitality and tourism related literature within the context of festivals (Organ et al., 2015), tourist destinations (Chen & Rahman, 2018), tourism brands (So et al., 2014, 2016), and cultural heritage sites (Alrawadieh et al., 2019). The definition of engagement varies in different disciplines. In some studies, engagement has been considered as a unidimensional variable whereas in some other studies it has been evaluated as a multidimensional variable (Brodie et al., 2011). However, based on the subject and context of a study, engagement can be measured and adapted differently. Nevertheless, despite the overarching attention to tourist engagement, the conceptualization of engagement has been subjected to varying interpretations (Rasoolimanesh, Noor, Schuberth, & Jaafar, 2019; So, King, & Sparks, 2014; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2016; Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014). Amid these growing studies on the conceptualisation of tourist engagement, the multidimensional conceptualization of visitor engagement proposed by So et al. (2014) has been the widely used scale (e.g. Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; So et al., 2016). This multidimensional tourist engagement scale comprises five dimensions: identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction. This study has therefore adopted this scale. According to So et al. (2014), enthusiasm dimension reflects the high level of excitement and interest of a person with regard to the focus of engagement. Therefore, tourists who are engaged with a travel destination have an enthusiastic and passionate attitude about the destination (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019), whereas attention dimension is defined as the attentiveness of a tourist to the destination (So et al., 2016). The absorption dimension is referred to the concept that a tourist is totally absorbed in their destination experience; consequently, the engaged tourist can simply do not remember how much time he or she spends at a destination (So et al., 2014). Also, it is deemed possible to consider tourist engagement from an interactive viewpoint, which mainly includes dimensions of interaction and identification. Interactions between tourists and other stakeholders, such as local people, are explained in the interaction dimension as advocated by Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019. Finally, identification is the perceived oneness of a person to the destination or belonging to it. Sometimes, a tourist might highly identify him/herself with a destination so that it is difficult to separate it from their sense of self (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; So et al., 2016).

### *2.2.2. Tourist engagement and revisit intention*

Studies on tourist intention to revisit or recommend a destination is gaining more attention (Vittersø et al. 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2020). Intentions of revisit refer to a visitor's desire to return to a location (Brodie et al. 2011). Many studies have focused on revisit intention to assure

the success of tourism destinations (Kumar & Kaushik 2020; Sharifi-Tehrani & Esfandiar, 2018). Prior studies indicated that visitor's engagement with the events held at the tourism locations will enhance their intention to revisit (Scarpi et al., 2019). A study conducted by Bryce et al. (2015) highlighted the positive effect of tourist engagement on revisit intention. Therefore, if tourists are highly engaged with destinations, they are most likely to return to the same location in the future (Chen & Chen 2010; Huang & Choi 2019; Prayag et al., 2013). Organ et al. (2015) argued that a higher level of tourist engagement is positively associated with tourist intention to revisit and recommend local food. Moreover, So et al. (2016) highlighted the same report ; high engagement of tourists will result in their revisit intention. Vittersø et al. (2017) has presented an empirical study to support the impact of tourist engagement on revisit intention. Besides, Pan et al. (2020) indicated that, tourist engagement might result in revisit intentions. People who expressed a stronger level of identification with the destination as a brand were more likely to visit and/or revisit the location in the future (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). In addition, Rather (2020) highlighted that visitor engagement with tourism destinations positively influences behavioural intention such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth. Therefore, this study argues that tourists who are highly engaged with destinations are most likely to revisit the same location . Hence, we proposed the following hypotheses.

*H1: Enthusiasm has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

*H2: Attention has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

*H3: Absorption has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

*H4: Interaction has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

*H5: Identification has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

### *2.2.3. Tourist engagement and WOM intention*

Derived from marketing discipline, WOM is described as verbal, one-on-one communication about a product or service (Lai et al., 2020; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). In a similar vein, Jalilvand et al. (2017) defined WOM as informal communication between the consumers and those interested in the products or services. WOM communication has increasingly become a significant concept in contemporary marketing (Kankhuni & Ngwira, 2021) as consumers' behavior is becoming progressively resistant to conventional advertising and other marketing communications. Not only does positive WOM publicity creates a positive image of the destination but also raise awareness of the destination among people who may not be familiar with the area (ref is needed). Positive WOM indicates the customer's loyalty and increases the likelihood of a customer purchasing the firm's products.

Prior literature posits that WOM influences tourists' behaviour and consumption decisions (e.g. Correia & Kozak, 2016; Jalilvand et al., 2017). WOM concept relies on cognitive, emotive, and interactionist viewpoints (Taheri et al., 2021). Consumer engagement has long been thought to indicate the likelihood of repurchase or WOM intention in the marketing literature (Hollebeek, 2011; Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to investigate WOM as an outcome of visitor engagement. Previous studies in tourism demonstrated that higher level of visitor engagement impacts WOM intention positively (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021b). Engagement has been proven to result in revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth (So et al., 2014). However, study on tourist engagement and WOM behaviour is growing as an important topic in tourism and hospitality

studies, although insight in this field remains limited. Therefore, based on these arguments, this study posits:

*H6: Enthusiasm has a positive effect on WOM intention.*

*H7: Attention has a positive effect on WOM intention.*

*H8: Absorption has a positive effect on WOM intention.*

*H9: Interaction has a positive effect on WOM intention.*

*H10: Identification has a positive effect on WOM intention.*

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study.

[Figure 1 about here]

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Study context**

Empirical data were collected from domestic tourists who were visiting heritage sites of historic city of Kashan, Iran. The city of Kashan is a significant heritage city in the country having three UNESCO-listed elements along with some tentative listed elements and splendid historical buildings and traditional architectural works of art (UNESCO, 2020). There are more than 300 heritage elements including historical houses, mosques, bazaar, and a garden among others (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Kashan is a major holiday destination for domestic and international tourists (Gannon et al., 2021). Before COVID-19, the city attracted over one million domestic visitors per year and over 200,000 foreign tourists (Gannon, et al., 2021). For these reasons, Kashan was chosen as the study location for this research.

#### **3.2. Data collection**

The quantitative method using a self-administered questionnaire was applied to conduct this study and to collect data. The items to measure dimensions of visitor engagement (VE) (i.e. Enthusiasm, Attention, Absorption, Interaction, and Identification) were adapted from So et al., (2014, 2016). The items to measure revisit intention were adapted from Bonn et al., (2007) and Chen and Chen (2010), and the items to measure WOM intention were adapted from Pandey and Sahu, 2020; Yen and Tang, 2015. The questionnaire was administered in Persian, the respondents' native language. To ensure the equivalence of the items in Persian from English, the researcher was assisted by two bilingual translators (i.e. researchers of this study) to apply a translation-back-translation method to the questionnaire (Sharifi-Tehrani & Esfandiar, 2018; Lochrie et al. 2019). The questionnaire was then pre-tested by interviewing five experts and pilot tested with a sample of 30 tourists. This led to some minor paraphrasing for those items that provided low internal consistency to ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

The data for this study were collected from May to August 2019. Purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data from domestic tourists in some selected heritage sites in Kashan, Iran. A total number of 350 questionnaires were completed. Among total number of 350 completed questionnaires, 204 respondents were male, whereas 146 female were participated in this survey. Majority of respondents (222) were 18-38 years old, and only 128 respondents were

older than 38 years old. Most of respondents (194) had been graduated either from college or university, and 156 respondents had lower levels of education.

Because of collecting data from one single source, the Common Method Variance (CMV) was tested using two recommended approaches for PLS-SEM namely the full collinearity (Kock, 2015), and the correlation matrix procedure. In order to ensure that the model is free of CMV, the full collinearity using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) should be lower than 3.3 (Kock, 2015; Kock & Lynn, 2012), and the correlation between constructs should be lower than 0.9 (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021b). Using these two approaches showed satisfactory results for both the full collinearity VIF and the correlation for all constructs which were lower than 3.3 and 0.9, respectively. This indicates that the results were not biased by CMV.

To analyse the data and to test the hypotheses, this study applied Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). The PLS-SEM is applied, because of the prediction nature of the current study (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, because this study aims to apply fsQCA to obtain deeper insights, only PLS-SEM can provide a unique construct score as the input of fsQCA (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021a). Several previous studies in tourism have applied fsQCA (Fotiadis, 2018; Fotiadis et al., 2016; Olya & Gavilyan, 2017), or combination of PLS-SEM and fsQCA (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021c; Taheri et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2019). By application of fsQCA, we identified sufficient causal combinations (i.e. configurations, recipes) to generate revisit and WOM intentions (Olya & Gavilyan, 2017; Woodside 2013; Pappas & Woodside, 2021). In terms of statistical software, this study employed the SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015) to perform PLS-SEM and the fsQCA 3.0 to identify the sufficient configurations of antecedents to generate outcome (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). The consistency and coverage for each configuration should be greater than 0.8 and 0.2 respectively to consider a configuration sufficient to generate outcome (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020).

## **4. Results and findings**

### ***4.1. Results of assessment of model using PLS-SEM***

In order to assess the model using PLS-SEM, we need to check the measurement model including reliability and validity, and structural model (Hair et al., 2019). The Composite Reliability (CR), rho\_A, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), should be greater than 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5 respectively to establish reliability and convergent validity of reflective constructs involved in the framework of this study (Ali et al. 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Table 1 shows the results of the assessment of measurement model indicating the establishment reliability and convergent validity for all reflective constructs including VE\_Enthusiasm (VEN), VE\_Attention (VAT), VE\_Absorption (VAB), VE\_Interaction (VIN), VE\_Identification (VID), Revisit Intention (RINT), and WOM intention.

[Table 1 about here]

Moreover, using two approaches called the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio, the discriminant validity has been assessed (Rasoolimanesh & Ali, 2018; Henseler et al., 2015) Use the full list of authors as Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Table 2 and Table 3

show the results of discriminant validity assessment. The square root of AVE of all constructs are higher than the correlation of a construct with all other constructs in the model (Table 2), and the HTMT values are lower than 0.9 (Table 3), demonstrate the establishment of discriminant validity for this study (Ali et al., 2018; Henseler et al., 2015).

[Table 2 about here]

[Table 3 about here]

Figure 2 and Table 4 shows the results of structural model assessment and hypothesis testing for the effects of dimensions of visitor engagement on revisit and WOM intentions in heritage sites. The results show the values of 0.164 and 0.224 for the  $R^2$  of revisit and WOM intentions respectively. The values of  $R^2$  can be considered acceptable for behavioural studies (Hair et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). The results of hypothesis testing using PLS-SEM show that other than the significant effect of VE\_Absorption (VAB) on revisit intention (H3), , the effects of other dimensions of visitor engagement on revisit intention are not significant (i.e., H1, H2, H4, and H5). As for the effects of dimensions of visitor engagement on WOM intention, the results show the significant effects of VE\_Interaction (VIN) and VE\_Identification (VID) on WOM intention (H9 and H10). However, the effects of VE\_Enthusiasm (VEN), VE\_Attention (VAT) and VE\_Absorption (VAB)on WOM intention are not significant (i.e., H6, H7, and H8).

[Figure 2 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

#### **4.2. Results of fsQCA**

In order to perform the fsQCA, the standardized scores of constructs from PLS-SEM results were used as the inputs of fsQCA, and the construct scores were calibrated to [0 – 1] (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021a). Using construct scores from the PLS-SEM results, minus three was set to zero (no set membership), zero to 0.5 (crossover point), and three to 1 (full set membership) (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021a). To determine which combinations of conditions or configurations are adequate to produce the outcome under investigation, truth table was created (Rubinson, 2019). Setting the consistency threshold to 3.00 as recommended for samples larger than 150, the rows with 2 cases and lower were deleted (Fiss, 2011). In the next step, consistency and coverage for all configurations were calculated, and sufficient configurations with coverage greater than 0.2 and consistency higher than 0.8 were identified (Ragin, 2009; Pappas & Woodside, 2021).

The fsQCA computes three types of outputs with sufficient configurations known as solutions, namely complex solution, intermediate solution, and parsimonious solution. “solution refers to a combination of configurations that is supported by a high number of cases, where the rule ‘the combination leads to the outcome’ is consistent” (Pappas & Woodside, 2021, p. 11). The intermediate set is the solution which is recommended in the literature (Olya, 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021a), and for this study the intermediate outputs were chosen.

The results of fsQCA have been presented in Table 5 (outcome: revisit intention), and Table 6 (outcome: WOM intention). The results of fsQCA show more heterogenous combinations of

dimensions of visitor engagement as the sufficient configurations to generate a high level of revisit and WOM intentions. The results of fsQCA identified similar sufficient configurations to generate revisit and WOM intentions. Tables 5 and Table 6 show three configurations (e.g. configuration 1: VAT\*VEN\*~VIN; configuration 2, ~VEN\*VID\*VIN; configuration 3: VAB\*VAT\*VEN) to generate high levels of revisit and WOM intentions. The configuration 1 shows the importance of VE\_Enthusiasm (VEN), and VE\_Attention (VAT), even when the VE\_Interaction (VIN) is low, whereas, configuration 2 shows combination of a high level of VE\_Interaction (VIN), VE\_Identification (VID), and low level of VE\_Enthusiasm (VEN) as a sufficient configuration. The configuration 3 identified the high levels of VE\_Attention (VAT), VE\_Absorption (VAB), and VE\_Enthusiasm (VEN), as a sufficient configuration to predict higher level of visitor engagement and WOM intention.

Based on the above results, we can identify more heterogeneous combinations of dimensions of visitor engagement to generate high level of revisit and WOM intentions compared to the results of PLS-SEM.

[Table 5 about here]

[Table 6 about here]

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study investigates the effects of dimensions of visitor engagement (e.g. enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification) on revisit and WOM intentions. The results of PLS-SEM only showed the significant effect of absorption on revisit intention of domestic heritage tourists in Kashan, and the effects of other dimensions on revisit intention were not significant. One possible explanation for this could be the pleasant state of absorption in which the tourist is in achieving a state of deep relaxation allowing him/her to be deeply engrossed/engaged while visiting attractions.

The engagement literature indicates that a deep level of concentration and total immersion in one's role while visiting a place signifies a strong level of intention to revisit the place in future (So et al., 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). However, for WOM intention, the results showed the significant effects of interaction, and identification among the dimensions of visitor engagement, while the effects of other dimensions (e.g. enthusiasm, attention, and absorption) were not significant. These results of PLS-SEM for both revisit and WOM intentions are contradictory with previous studies (e.g. Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; Chen & Rahman, 2018). This could be explained by the fact that interactions of tourists with local community and other tourists in a destination potentially shape their positive memory of a destination which in turn motivates them to participate in WOM communications through online platforms (So et al., 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021b). Overall, higher level of engagement with strong interaction and identification translates into greater loyalty to a destination thereby increasing the likelihood of revisit intention (So et al., 2016).

The results of fsQCA showed more heterogeneous results, because of case-based nature of fsQCA. In PLS-SEM, we can test the main (net) effects of antecedents on outcomes; whereas in fsQCA analysis, various sufficient combinations of antecedents can be identified. Thus, we could assume that the results of these two methods are complementary.

According to the results of fsQCA, we can observe three sufficient combinations of dimensions of visitor engagement to predict revisit and WOM intentions of domestic heritage tourists in

Kashan. (1) Existence and high level of enthusiasm and attention is a sufficient configuration for both revisit and WOM intentions even when the level of interaction is low. (2) High level of interaction and identification, and low level of enthusiasm, as well as (3) high levels of attention, absorption, and enthusiasm together predict high levels of revisit and WOM intention. Therefore, based on fsQCA results, all dimensions can influence revisit and WOM intentions of domestic tourists visiting heritage sites of Kashan, but in different circumstances and combinations with other dimensions. This explains the context-based nature of tourists engagement.

### ***5.1. Theoretical implications***

The main theoretical implications of the present findings are as follows. First, the study bridges the research gap concerning the associations between tourist engagement and behavioural intentions within heritage tourism context. This study contributes to the growing research on tourist engagement by investigating the tourist engagement dimensions on behavioural intent. Previous studies have not investigated the effects of single dimensions of engagement on behavioural intentions and have largely focused on tourist engagement as a concept rather than a multidimensional concept. Previous studies highlighted further inquiry into the role of tourist engagement dimensions on behavioural intentions for future research (e.g. So et al., 2014, 2016).

Given the lack of theoretical unanimity among researchers regarding the components of tourist engagement and the complex nature of engagement, previous research suggested further exploration of engagement in other contexts. This study, therefore, responded to the aforementioned suggestions and revealed that enhanced tourist engagement further strengthened the behavioural intentions of tourists. This study empirically validated findings in heritage tourism literature by investigating the association between tourist engagement dimensions and behavioural intentions.

By testing the visitor engagement scale in a heritage tourism context, this research contributes to the growing research on visitor engagement. Overall, the results of this study provide important theoretical evidence for capturing tourist engagement and associated behavioral intention more accurately.

### ***5.2. Practical implications***

The findings provide a useful guiding framework for destinations to establish or improve a tourist engagement and to emphasize the role of engagement in shaping destination loyalty which in turn has significant implications for destination marketing and development. For instance, higher interactions between the tourist and the local community and providing opportunities for tourists to engage actively in destination-related activities can potentially trigger their revisit intention and WOM communications. As the findings attest, the absorption dimension of engagement significantly affects revisit intention. DMOs need to place an emphasis on this dimension of engagement as the repeat visitors are often easier and cheaper to keep rather than new visitors. This reflects the observation of several studies that show tourists who are highly engaged with

destinations are most likely to revisit the same location (So et al., 2016; Vittersø et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that the interaction and identification dimensions of visitor engagement positively influence WOM intention. Thus, DMOs need to improve these two dimensions of tourist engagement while the tourists are visiting a destination or an attraction. This will help increase the likelihood of tourists revisit intention and tourists' involvement in WOM communications. The latter is of paramount significance in the COVID-19 travel environment as why? For example, as people have a negative image of destinations with tourist attractions. DMOs should seek to enable more effective engagement of visitors in the destination as well as on-site in order to improve tourist experiences, destination image and revisit intention.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions made, the results of this study are not without limitations. Perhaps, as the majority of cross-sectional studies (Alonso-Vazquez, Packer, Fairley, & Hughes, 2019; Esfandiari, Dowling, Pearce, & Goh, 2021), the main limitation of this study pertains to the generalizability of the sample as well as the temporal aspect of the study. In addition, in this study, the scale of visitor engagement has been assessed within a heritage tourism context with a focus on domestic tourists. One direction for future research could be the comparative study between domestic and international visitors which might have interesting implications for the DMOs in Kashan which is visited by both domestic and international visitors. Moreover, further studies need to repeat this study in different contexts. One further line of inquiry for further research could be a comparison between visitor engagement in heritage tourism and other tourism contexts. Finally, we have suggested that visitor engagement will also influence revisit intentions in a COVID-19 tourism environment. Further research is required to assess the extent of this relationship and its connections to behavioral intention of tourists.

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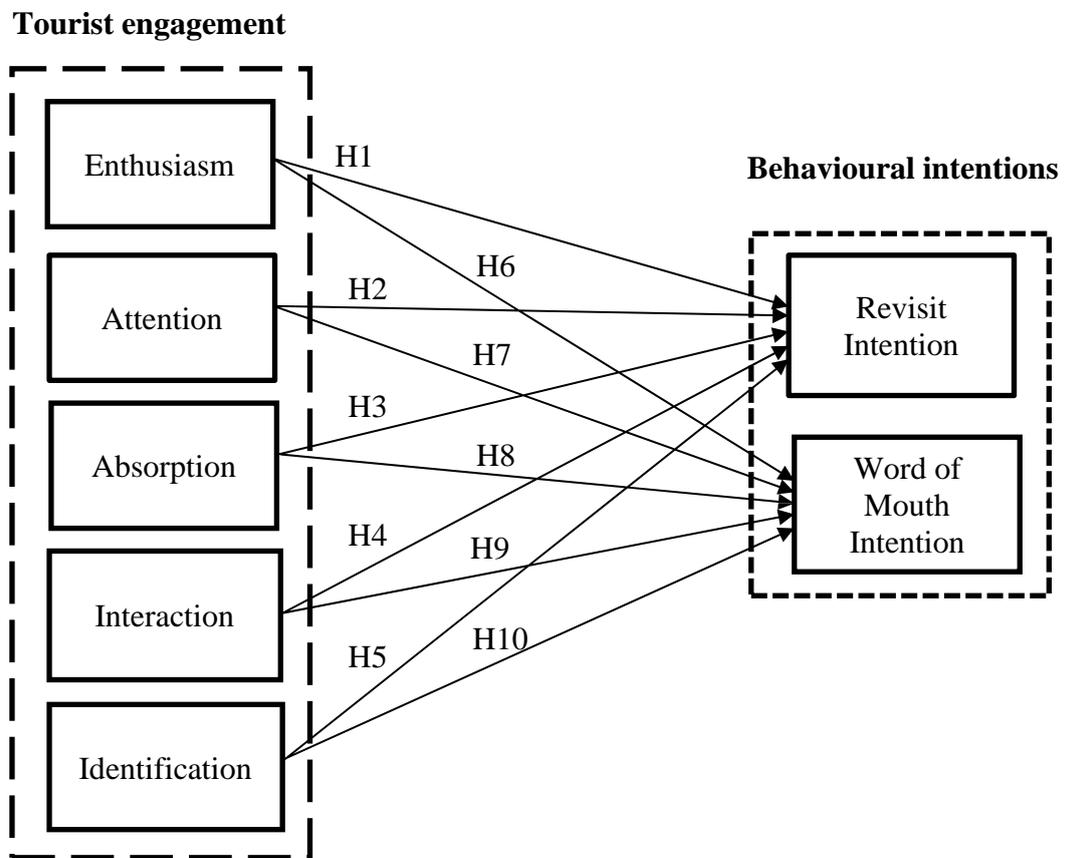
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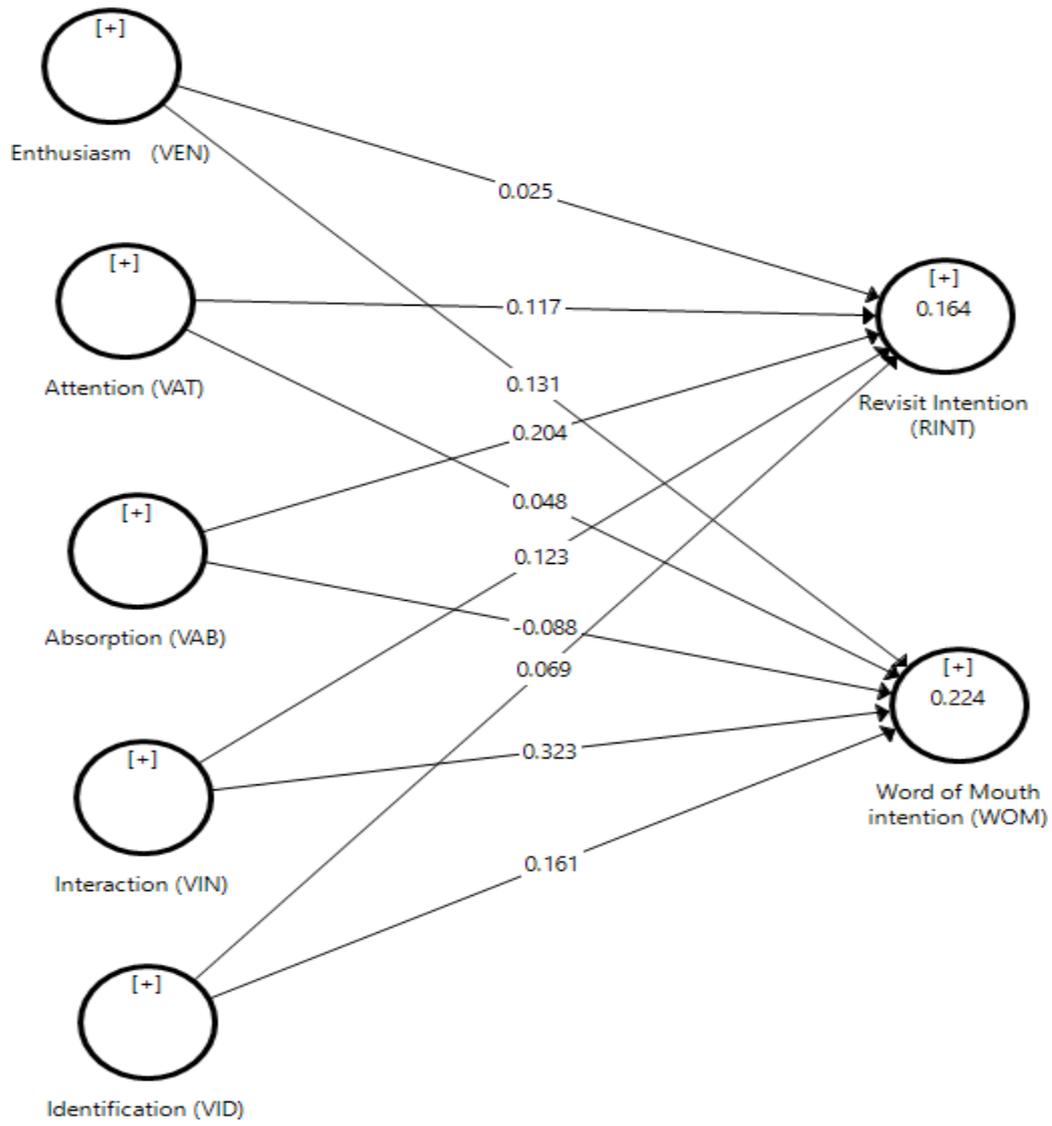
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**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework



**Figure 2.** Results of assessment of structural model

**Table 1.** Assessment of reflective and composite measurement models

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Loadings</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>rho_A</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b>VE_Enthusiasm (VEN)</b>			0.878	0.813	0.707
	VEN1	0.817			
	VEN2	0.877			
	VEN3	0.826			
<b>VE_Attention (VAT)</b>			0.865	0.791	0.682
	VAT1	0.771			
	VAT2	0.852			
	VAT3	0.852			
<b>VE_Absorption (VAB)</b>			0.886	0.808	0.721
	VAB1	0.875			
	VAB2	0.843			
	VAB3	0.829			
<b>VE_Interaction (VIN)</b>			0.923	0.879	0.800
	VIN1	0.902			
	VIN2	0.899			
	VIN3	0.881			
<b>VE_Identification (VID)</b>			0.948	0.920	0.858
	VID1	0.912			
	VID2	0.936			
	VID3	0.931			
<b>Revisit Intention (RINT)</b>			0.926	0.885	0.807
	INT1	0.921			
	INT2	0.890			
	INT3	0.884			
<b>Word of Mouth intention (WOM)</b>			0.858	0.773	0.604
	WOM1	0.789			
	WOM 2	0.824			
	WOM 3	0.826			
	WOM 4	0.656			

*Note: See Appendix 1 for the names of the items*

**Table 2.** Discriminant Validity using Fornell-Larcker criterion

Constructs	VEN	VAT	VAB	VIN	VID	RINT	WOM
<b>VEN</b>	<b>0.841</b>						
<b>VAT</b>	0.717	<b>0.826</b>					
<b>VAB</b>	0.475	0.391	<b>0.849</b>				
<b>VIN</b>	0.301	0.277	0.483	<b>0.894</b>			
<b>VID</b>	0.197	0.220	0.408	0.630	<b>0.926</b>		
<b>RINT</b>	0.256	0.264	0.349	0.305	0.260	<b>0.898</b>	
<b>WOM</b>	0.285	0.265	0.292	0.367	0.362	0.690	<b>0.777</b>

*Note:* VE\_Enthusiasm=VEN, VE\_Attention =VAT, VE\_Absorption=VAB, VE\_Interaction =VIN, VE\_Identification=VID, Revisit Intention =RINT, Word of Mouth intention =WOM.

**Table 3.** Discriminant Validity using HTMT ratio

Constructs	VEN	VAT	VAB	VIN	VID	RINT	WOM
<b>VEN</b>							
<b>VAT</b>	0.895						
<b>VAB</b>	0.596	0.484					
<b>VIN</b>	0.354	0.332	0.563				
<b>VID</b>	0.228	0.257	0.475	0.700			
<b>RINT</b>	0.307	0.318	0.406	0.345	0.285		
<b>WOM</b>	0.358	0.325	0.315	0.429	0.330	0.848	

*Note:* VE\_Enthusiasm=VEN, VE\_Attention =VAT, VE\_Absorption=VAB, VE\_Interaction =VIN, VE\_Identification=VID, Revisit Intention =RINT, Word of Mouth intention =WOM.

**Table 4.** Results of hypothesis testing

	Hypothesis	Direct effect	<i>CI</i> <sub>0.95</sub> <i>Bias Corrected</i>	Supported
<b>H1</b>	VEN → RINT	0.025	[-0.123, 0.175]	NO
<b>H2</b>	VAT → RINT	0.117	[-0.017, 0.259]	NO
<b>H3</b>	<b>VAB → RINT</b>	<b>0.204</b>	<b>[0.053, 0.334]</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>H4</b>	VIN → RINT	0.123	[-0.020, 0.285]	NO
<b>H5</b>	VID → RINT	0.069	[-0.041, 0.185]	NO
<b>H6</b>	VEN → WOM	0.131	[-0.002, 0.269]	NO
<b>H7</b>	VAT → WOM	0.048	[-0.087, 0.179]	NO
<b>H8</b>	VAB → WOM	-0.088	[-0.205, 0.027]	NO
<b>H9</b>	<b>VIN → WOM</b>	<b>0.323</b>	<b>[0.209, 0.442]</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>H10</b>	<b>VID → WOM</b>	<b>0.161</b>	<b>[0.043, 0.274]</b>	<b>YES</b>

*Note:* VE\_Enthusiasm=VEN, VE\_Attention =VAT, VE\_Absorption=VAB, VE\_Interaction =VIN, VE\_Identification=VID, Revisit Intention =RINT, Word of Mouth intention =WOM

**Table 5.** Sufficient Causal Configurations for Revisit Intention

Configurations	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
<b>Configurations for high Revisit Intention</b>			
<b>Revisit Intention = <math>f(VEN; VAT; VAB; VIN; VID)</math></b>			
VAT*VEN*~VIN	0.645	0.025	0.893
~VEN*VID*VIN	0.616	0.016	0.882
VAB*VAT*VEN	0.708	0.071	0.886
<b>solution coverage: 0.899</b>			
<b>solution consistency: 0.740</b>			
<i>Note:</i> VE_Enthusiasm=VEN, VE_Attention =VAT, VE_Absorption=VAB, VE_Interaction =VIN, VE_Identification=VID.			

**Table 6.** Sufficient Causal Configurations for Word of Mouth intention

Configurations	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
<b>Configurations for high Word of Mouth intention</b>			
<b>Word of Mouth intention = <math>f(VEN; VAT; VAB; VIN; VID)</math></b>			
VAT*VEN*~VIN	0.620	0.014	0.872
~VEN*VID*VIN	0.625	0.021	0.907
VAB*VAT*VEN	0.700	0.70	0.888
<b>solution coverage: 0.885</b>			
<b>solution consistency: 0.739</b>			
<i>Note:</i> VE_Enthusiasm=VEN, VE_Attention =VAT, VE_Absorption=VAB, VE_Interaction =VIN, VE_Identification=VID.			

## Appendix 1. Adapted items

<b>VE Enthusiasm</b>
I am heavily into this tourism site in Kashan.
I am passionate about this tourism site in Kashan.
I am enthusiastic about this tourism site in Kashan.
<b>VE Attention</b>
I pay a lot of attention to anything about this tourism site.
Anything related to this tourism site grabs my attention.
I focus all my attention on my visit at this tourism site.
<b>VE Absorption</b>
When I am interacting with the tourism site, I forget everything else around me.
Time flies when I am interacting with the tourism site.
When interacting with the tourism site, it is difficult to detach myself.
<b>VE Interaction</b>
I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded community in the tourism site.
I am someone who likes to actively participate in the conversation with the the locals and tourists in this tourism site .
In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the tourism site community.
<b>VE Identification</b>
When someone criticizes this tourism site, it feels like a personal insult to me.
When I talk about this tourism site, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’ because the identity of the site suites me.
When someone praises this tourism site, it feels like a personal compliment to me.
<b>Revisit Intention</b>
I will revisit this place in the future.
If given the opportunity, I will return to this place.
The likelihood of my return to this heritage site is high for my another heritage trip.
<b>WOM intention</b>
I will recommend this place to my friends and relatives.
When I talk about my visit to this city, I will say good things about it.
I will encourage friends and relatives to visit this place.
I will share good things about the heritage sites of Kashan in social media.