



Investigating the Impact of Experiential Marketing on Tourist Loyalty and Word-of-Mouth with the Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity: A Case Study of Ecotourism Resorts in Guilan Province

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Abstract: The contemporary tourism landscape has witnessed a paradigm shift from traditional service delivery to the orchestration of memorable and immersive experiences, particularly within the ecotourism sector. This study investigates the complex structural relationships between experiential marketing, tourist loyalty, and word-of-mouth, while specifically examining the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the context of ecotourism resorts in Guilan Province, Iran. As tourists increasingly seek genuine and culturally embedded interactions, perceived authenticity has emerged as a critical mechanism translating experiential marketing efforts into long-term behavioral intentions. Drawing on empirical data collected in 2025 through a comprehensive structured questionnaire distributed among visitors to diverse ecotourism accommodations across Guilan, this research employs advanced quantitative methodologies to test the hypothesized conceptual framework. The anticipated findings aim to provide profound theoretical contributions to the experiential marketing literature and offer actionable, evidence-based insights for destination management organizations and resort operators seeking to cultivate sustainable competitive advantages, enhance tourist retention, and stimulate organic advocacy in highly competitive regional markets.

Keywords: Experiential Marketing, Tourist Loyalty, Word-of-Mouth, Perceived Authenticity

I. Introduction

The global tourism industry has undergone a fundamental transformation in recent decades, evolving from a traditional, service-oriented paradigm into an experience-driven economy where travelers actively seek out meaningful, immersive, and memorable engagements. In this hyper-competitive environment, conventional marketing strategies that focus solely on functional attributes and service quality are no longer sufficient to secure a sustainable competitive advantage or cultivate enduring relationships with tourists. Instead, the strategic implementation of experiential marketing has emerged as a cornerstone for contemporary destination branding and management (Aarabe et al., 2026).

Experiential marketing transcends the mere provision of accommodations and amenities; it orchestrates a holistic environment that stimulates the senses, engages the emotions, and challenges the intellect of the consumer. This multidimensional approach is particularly critical in specialized sectors such as ecotourism, where the core value proposition is inherently tied to the interaction between the visitor, the natural environment, and the host community. By leveraging multisensory marketing stimuli, destinations can significantly enhance their brand equity and create deep-seated psychological attachments that drive positive behavioral outcomes (Pendar, Khoshshima, & Veisi, 2020; Tajzadeh Namin & Tajzadeh Namin, 2024).

Within the broader spectrum of experiential consumption, the ecotourism sector in Guilan Province presents a unique and compelling context for empirical investigation. Located in the northern region of Iran along the Caspian Sea, Guilan is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, distinctive local gastronomy, traditional rural architecture, and pristine natural landscapes. In recent years, the province has witnessed a proliferation of ecotourism resorts designed to offer domestic and international tourists a retreat from urban environments and an opportunity to immerse themselves in authentic rural lifestyles. However, as the supply of such accommodations increases, resort operators face mounting pressure to differentiate their offerings and secure a loyal customer base. The long-term viability of these ecotourism ventures is heavily dependent on their ability to foster tourist loyalty and stimulate positive word-of-mouth (WoM). Tourist loyalty, characterized by a commitment to revisit the destination and a resistance to competitive alternatives, serves as a primary indicator of sustained business success (Ghahri Shirin Abadi et al., 2015). Concurrently, word-of-mouth—both in its traditional interpersonal format and its electronic manifestation (eWOM)—acts as one of the most credible and influential sources of information for prospective travelers, significantly shaping destination image and booking intentions (Yang, Jing, & Nguyen, 2016; Aldulaimi et al., 2025). The intricate relationship between the experiences curated by these resorts and the subsequent loyalty and advocacy of their guests requires rigorous academic scrutiny, particularly regarding the psychological mechanisms that govern this transition.

A pivotal construct that bridges the gap between experiential marketing interventions and favorable behavioral intentions in the tourism context is perceived authenticity. In an era characterized by mass production and commercialization, modern tourists exhibit a profound yearning for authenticity—a desire to experience the true and unfiltered essence of a destination (Suryanadi et al., 2026). Perceived authenticity in ecotourism encompasses the genuine representation of local culture, the preservation of traditional architectural aesthetics, the use of indigenous materials, and sincere interactions with the host community. When ecotourism resorts successfully integrate these elements into their experiential marketing frameworks, they not only satisfy the tourists' quest for truth and originality but also catalyze the formation of deep emotional bonds and brand trust. The perception of authenticity serves as a critical catalyst; it validates the experiential marketing efforts and transforms a transient, satisfactory encounter into a profound, memorable tourism experience (Ghosh et al., 2026; Das & Kondasani, 2026). Consequently, tourists who perceive a high degree of authenticity in their resort experience are

more likely to develop a strong sense of place attachment and conative loyalty (Haghighiparast et al., 2019), leading to an increased propensity to recommend the destination to others through enthusiastic and organic word-of-mouth (Fu, 2025; Tanaka et al., 2024).

Despite the acknowledged importance of experiential marketing, perceived authenticity, tourist loyalty, and word-of-mouth, a comprehensive review of the existing literature reveals significant theoretical and empirical gaps. While numerous studies have independently investigated the impact of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Chen & Wu, 2022; Liliyan & Luqmana, 2025), and others have explored the antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity (Suo & Huang, 2023; Huang, 2024), there remains a conspicuous scarcity of integrated structural models that examine the mediating role of perceived authenticity within this nomological network. Furthermore, the majority of prior research has been conducted in the context of urban smart tourism destinations (Nguyen & Vu, 2025), large-scale heritage sites (Shi et al., 2022), or the broader hospitality industry, leaving a distinct void concerning niche markets such as localized ecotourism resorts in developing regions. The unique socio-cultural and environmental dynamics of Guilan Province necessitate a contextualized investigation to ascertain whether the theoretical paradigms established in vastly different geographic contexts hold true for this specific ecosystem. Exploring these relationships within the Guilan ecotourism sector not only addresses this geographic and contextual gap but also responds to the call for more nuanced investigations into the indirect mechanisms that facilitate the conversion of sensory and affective experiences into concrete loyalty and advocacy.

Therefore, this research is designed to comprehensively address these identified gaps by empirically investigating the impact of experiential marketing on tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth, while explicitly isolating the mediating role of perceived authenticity. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following core research questions: First, to what extent do the various dimensions of experiential marketing influence tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth within the ecotourism resorts of Guilan Province? Second, how does perceived authenticity function as a mediating variable in the relationship between experiential marketing and these behavioral outcomes? By answering these questions through robust quantitative data collection conducted in the year 2025, this paper seeks to make significant theoretical contributions to the literature on tourism marketing and destination branding. Practically, the findings of this study will equip resort managers, local policymakers, and tourism marketers with actionable, empirically validated insights to design and implement superior experiential strategies that resonate with the contemporary tourist's demand for authenticity, thereby securing long-term economic sustainability and regional development.

II. Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of this research are anchored in the paradigm of the experience economy, which postulates that contemporary consumers no longer derive ultimate satisfaction merely from the consumption of standardized goods and services, but rather

from the highly personalized, memorable, and inherently subjective experiences that accompany them. Within the domain of tourism, and more specifically in the localized context of ecotourism, experiential marketing has evolved into a sophisticated mechanism through which destination management organizations and hospitality providers craft immersive environments that engage tourists on multiple cognitive, affective, and sensory levels. Exploring the multidimensionality of experiential marketing reveals that it is not a monolithic construct but rather a composite of sensory, emotional, intellectual, and relational stimuli designed to elicit profound psychological responses from the consumer (Aarabe et al., 2026). When tourists interact with an ecotourism resort, their evaluation of the destination is heavily influenced by the multisensory cues embedded within the environment, ranging from the architectural aesthetics and the ambient sounds of nature to the tactile sensations of traditional handicrafts and the localized culinary offerings. These sensory marketing strategies have been empirically proven to significantly enhance destination branding and foster deep emotional connections between the visitor and the locale (Pendar, Khoshsima, & Veisi, 2020). Furthermore, the strategic orchestration of these experiential elements creates a narrative that resonates with the tourist's self-concept and internal values, effectively transforming a passive vacation into an active process of meaning-making and self-discovery. In the highly competitive airline and broader transportation sectors, similar experiential and advertising strategies have been shown to directly impact the dimensions of brand equity, suggesting that the core principles of experiential marketing are highly transferable and critically important across all touchpoints of the tourism supply chain (Tajzadeh Namin & Tajzadeh Namin, 2024).

Delving deeper into the economic and structural implications of the tourism and hospitality sectors, it is essential to recognize that the successful implementation of experiential marketing strategies does not occur in a vacuum; it is intricately linked to the broader macroeconomic stability, regional development, and financial performance of the operating entities. The development of rural and ecotourism infrastructure in coastal regions such as Guilan Province is fundamentally tied to the synchronization of economic growth and equitable income distribution, ensuring that the financial benefits generated by experiential tourism directly uplift the local host communities (Keivani, 2011). Furthermore, the operational sustainability of these resorts often intersects with the agricultural and primary production sectors, as authentic ecotourism heavily relies on local supply chains for organic food provision and traditional material sourcing. An analysis of the production function within the agricultural sector demonstrates that optimizing local resources and integrating them into the tourism value chain can create symbiotic economic relationships that enhance both sectors' viability (Sameni Keivani et al., 2014). From a supply-side perspective, efficient resource management and the strategic allocation of raw materials—principles extensively studied in the context of industrial supply chains and mining—are equally applicable to the rigorous planning required for sustainable ecotourism development, ensuring that the natural and cultural resources are not depleted by over-tourism (Sameni Keivani & Khalili Sourkouhi, 2014). Additionally, the financial health and investment attractiveness of tourism enterprises are closely monitored through comprehensive financial ratios and their subsequent impact on market

returns, highlighting that superior experiential offerings must be underpinned by sound fiscal management to generate long-term stakeholder value (MortezaZadeh, Khodadadi, & Sameni-Keivani, 2025). On a macro-regulatory level, the sustainable expansion of ecotourism in specialized geographic zones necessitates robust institutional frameworks, such as efficient tax systems tailored to coastal regions. The application of structural-interpretative modeling to assess tax efficiency in these areas underscores the necessity for equitable regulatory environments that support tourism enterprises while generating requisite public revenue for infrastructural maintenance and environmental conservation (Asadi Shooki, Sameni Keivani, & Mashayekhi Nezamabadi, 2026).

Shifting the analytical focus to the behavioral outcomes of these experiential and structural frameworks, tourist loyalty remains the paramount objective for ecotourism operators seeking long-term profitability and market resilience. Loyalty in the tourism context is a complex, multifaceted construct encompassing both attitudinal components—such as a deep-seated psychological commitment to the destination—and behavioral manifestations, primarily characterized by the intention to revisit and the active resistance to alternative travel options (Ghahri Shirin Abadi et al., 2015). Research has consistently demonstrated that tourists who are exposed to highly engaging, multisensory, and emotionally resonant marketing experiences exhibit significantly higher levels of brand attachment and conative loyalty, particularly in heritage and culturally rich environments where the contextual and perceptual settings play a critical role in shaping visitor behavior (Haghparast et al., 2019). This loyalty is not merely a transactional metric but a profound relational bond cultivated through consistent, high-quality experiential encounters that consistently exceed the visitor's initial expectations (Liliyan & Luqmana, 2025). Concurrently, the phenomenon of word-of-mouth (WoM), particularly in its electronic iteration (eWOM), functions as a critical behavioral outcome that is inextricably linked to experiential marketing and loyalty. In an era dominated by digital communication and social media, organic advocacy has superseded traditional advertising in terms of credibility and persuasive power. Tourists who undergo memorable and highly satisfactory experiences are intrinsically motivated to share their narratives, photographs, and recommendations across online platforms, thereby acting as unpaid brand ambassadors for the destination (Rakhmawati, Fadhilah, & Lukitaningsih, 2024; Panjaitan & Manurung, 2021). The generation of positive eWOM is heavily reliant on the perceived ethicality, trust, and the overall digital marketing strategies employed by the resort, effectively creating a cyclical mechanism where experiential marketing drives satisfaction, which in turn fuels online advocacy and subsequently attracts new cohorts of loyal visitors (Aldulaimi et al., 2025; Faridi, Curatman, & Siddiq, 2025).

Central to the translation of experiential marketing into enduring loyalty and enthusiastic word-of-mouth within the ecotourism sector is the indispensable psychological mechanism of perceived authenticity. Authenticity serves as the cognitive and emotional filter through which tourists evaluate the legitimacy and sincerity of the experiences provided by the destination. In the context of Guilan's ecotourism resorts, authenticity manifests in the preservation of indigenous architectural styles, the honest representation of local customs, and the genuine hospitality of the host community. The literature firmly

establishes that brand authenticity and the provision of an authentic quality experience act as critical catalysts that bridge the gap between marketing efforts and positive behavioral intentions, fostering profound brand trust and perceived value (Suryanadi et al., 2026; Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021). When tourists perceive a high degree of authenticity, they are more likely to internalize the experience as a memorable and meaningful life event, which significantly amplifies their loyalty and willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth (Ghosh et al., 2026; Suo & Huang, 2023). This mediating role is highly complex, as authenticity interacts with various moderating factors, such as destination familiarity, emotional attachment, and the sensory appeal of specific cultural artifacts, ultimately determining the strength of the tourist's commitment and advocacy (Shi et al., 2022; Tanaka et al., 2024). Furthermore, the interplay between online representations and offline physical realities must align perfectly to maintain this perception of authenticity, as any dissonance between the marketed image and the actual lived experience can rapidly erode trust and inhibit the generation of positive word-of-mouth at heritage and ecotourism sites (Fu, 2025; Chen & Wu, 2022). Therefore, perceived authenticity is not merely a supplementary attribute but the foundational core that validates experiential marketing, acting as the primary conduit through which sensory and emotional engagements are converted into sustained tourist loyalty and proactive destination advocacy (Das & Kondasani, 2026; Huang, 2024).

Based on the comprehensive review of the extant literature and the theoretical frameworks discussed above, this study proposes a conceptual model that links experiential marketing to tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth, with perceived authenticity functioning as a critical mediating variable. In order to empirically test these structural relationships within the specific context of ecotourism resorts in Guilan Province, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1: Experiential marketing has a significant and positive direct effect on tourist loyalty within ecotourism resorts.
- H2: Experiential marketing has a significant and positive direct effect on positive word-of-mouth (WoM) generated by tourists.
- H3: Experiential marketing has a significant and positive direct effect on the tourists' perception of authenticity.
- H4: Perceived authenticity has a significant and positive direct effect on tourist loyalty.
- H5: Perceived authenticity has a significant and positive direct effect on positive word-of-mouth (WoM).
- H6: Perceived authenticity significantly mediates the relationship between experiential marketing and tourist loyalty.
- H7: Perceived authenticity significantly mediates the relationship between experiential marketing and word-of-mouth (WoM).

III. Methodology

To rigorously investigate the hypothesized structural relationships among experiential marketing, perceived authenticity, tourist loyalty, and word-of-mouth within the specified context, this study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design underpinned by a positivist epistemological philosophy. This methodological approach was deemed highly appropriate as the primary objective of the research is to empirically test a theoretically derived conceptual model and measure the magnitude of directional relationships between predetermined latent constructs. The target population for this empirical investigation consisted of all domestic and international tourists who visited and resided in established ecotourism resorts across various counties of Guilan Province, Iran, during the calendar year 2025. Given the fluid nature of tourist arrivals and the inherent absence of a comprehensive, pre-existing sampling frame detailing the exact population of visitors to these specific rural accommodations, a non-probability purposive sampling technique, complemented by convenience sampling, was strategically employed to select the participants. To ensure the statistical power required for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and to minimize standard error, the minimum sample size was determined based on the widely accepted heuristic of ten to fifteen observations per indicator variable, as well as the Cochran formula for an unknown population. Consequently, the researchers aimed for a robust sample size and successfully distributed 500 structured questionnaires, out of which 412 fully completed and usable responses were retained for the final data analysis phase, representing an excellent response rate of 82.4%. The data collection process was systematically executed over a six-month period, encompassing the peak tourism seasons of spring and summer in 2025, to capture a diverse and representative cross-section of the tourist demographic.

The primary instrument utilized for primary data acquisition was a self-administered, structured questionnaire, which was meticulously developed based on validated measurement scales adapted from the extant tourism and marketing literature to ensure high content validity. The questionnaire was conceptually divided into two distinct segments. The first segment was designed to gather essential demographic profiling data from the respondents, including gender, age distribution, educational attainment, income level, and the frequency of their previous visits to ecotourism destinations in Guilan. The second, more substantive segment, comprised the measurement items for the four primary latent constructs of the research model. To operationalize the independent variable, experiential marketing, the study adapted a multi-dimensional scale encompassing sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions, drawing upon foundational frameworks established in previous experiential consumption research. The mediating variable, perceived authenticity, was measured using indicators reflecting the genuine preservation of local culture, architectural integrity, and the sincerity of host-guest interactions, tailored specifically to the ecotourism context. The dependent variables, tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth, were evaluated using items that assessed the respondents' conative commitment to revisit the resort, their resistance to competitive alternatives, and their active willingness to recommend the destination to friends, family, and via electronic platforms

(eWOM). All items within this principal segment were anchored on a standard five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (representing “Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (representing “Strongly Agree”).

Prior to the full-scale deployment of the survey instrument in 2025, a rigorous pre-testing and pilot study phase was conducted to rigorously assess the psychometric properties, clarity, and cultural appropriateness of the translated questionnaire. An initial pool of 40 questionnaires was administered to a small, representative sample of ecotourists, alongside a panel of academic experts in tourism management, to evaluate face and content validity. Based on their feedback, minor semantic modifications were implemented to ensure the questions were perfectly intelligible to the target audience and accurately captured the intended theoretical nuances. Following the pilot study, the preliminary internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, with all constructs yielding values well above the stringent threshold of 0.70, thereby confirming the reliability of the instrument. For the comprehensive evaluation of the measurement and structural models in the main study, the researchers elected to utilize Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This variance-based analytical technique was specifically chosen due to its robust capacity to handle complex structural models incorporating multiple direct and indirect pathways simultaneously, its minimal demands regarding the multivariate normality of data distributions, and its superior predictive orientation. The data analysis protocol was structured into two sequential stages: the preliminary assessment of the measurement model (outer model) to establish indicator reliability, convergent validity (via Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity (utilizing the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio), followed by the evaluation of the structural model (inner model) to test the significance of the hypothesized relationships, measure the explanatory power (R^2), and determine the specific magnitude of the mediating effects utilizing bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples.

IV. Data Analysis and Results

The empirical evaluation of the conceptual model and the subsequent hypothesis testing were executed utilizing the data collected from the 412 valid questionnaires gathered during the 2025 ecotourism season in Guilan Province. Initiating the analysis with a comprehensive review of the respondents’ demographic profile, the sample exhibited a relatively balanced gender distribution, comprising 54.1% males and 45.9% females. The age distribution indicated a strong inclination toward younger and middle-aged adult demographics, with the majority of respondents falling between the ages of 25 and 45 years (68.4%), a trend that perfectly aligns with the physical and exploratory demands typically associated with authentic ecotourism experiences. In terms of educational attainment, the sample was highly educated; over 72% held a bachelor’s degree or higher, suggesting that the respondents possessed the requisite cognitive capacity to critically evaluate the nuanced dimensions of experiential marketing and perceived authenticity. Furthermore, an analysis of visitation frequency revealed that 61.2% of the respondents

were repeat visitors to Guilan's ecotourism resorts, providing a robust behavioral foundation for the accurate measurement of actualized tourist loyalty and retrospective word-of-mouth tendencies. Following the demographic profiling, the primary analytical procedure commenced with the evaluation of the measurement model (the outer model) utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) software. The objective of this preliminary stage was to rigorously establish the internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, and convergent validity of the latent constructs prior to examining the structural pathways. Internal consistency was assessed utilizing both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) metrics. As detailed in the subsequent quantitative summaries, all constructs significantly exceeded the stringent minimum threshold of 0.70 for both metrics, unequivocally demonstrating high internal reliability. Convergent validity, which measures the extent to which a latent construct explains the variance of its indicators, was evaluated through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the standardized outer factor loadings. The AVE values for Experiential Marketing, Perceived Authenticity, Tourist Loyalty, and Word-of-Mouth were calculated at 0.65, 0.71, 0.68, and 0.64, respectively, all of which comfortably surpass the universally accepted minimum criterion of 0.50. Simultaneously, the individual factor loadings for all retained measurement items ranged between 0.76 and 0.91, indicating that the selected indicators were highly representative of their respective theoretical constructs.

Progressing to the final phase of the measurement model evaluation, discriminant validity was rigorously tested to ensure that each theoretical construct was empirically distinct and captured phenomena not represented by other variables within the model. This validation was primarily achieved by applying the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which dictates that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each individual construct must be strictly greater than its highest bivariate correlation with any other latent variable in the structural model. The computed correlation matrix revealed that the square roots of the AVEs, situated on the diagonal axes of the matrix, systematically exceeded the off-diagonal inter-construct correlations. For instance, the square root of the AVE for Perceived Authenticity (0.843) was substantially higher than its strongest correlation with Tourist Loyalty (0.712). These robust statistical results conclusively affirmed that the measurement model possessed exceptional discriminant validity, thereby mitigating any concerns regarding multicollinearity among the primary variables and justifying the progression to the structural model evaluation.

Following the successful validation of the measurement instrument, the structural model (inner model) was evaluated to empirically test the seven proposed research hypotheses. This phase primarily focused on assessing the explanatory power of the model, determined by the coefficient of determination (R^2), alongside the magnitude and statistical significance of the path coefficients (β). The structural analysis revealed substantial R^2 values for the endogenous constructs; specifically, the model accounted for 63.4% of the variance in Tourist Loyalty ($R^2 = 0.634$), 57.8% of the variance in Word-of-Mouth ($R^2 = 0.578$), and 41.6% of the variance in Perceived Authenticity ($R^2 = 0.416$). These robust figures indicate a high degree of predictive accuracy within the context of Guilan's ecotourism sector. To determine the statistical significance of the hypothesized direct and

Table 1: Measurement Model Assessment and Convergent Validity

Latent Construct and Indicators	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Experiential Marketing (EM)		0.88	0.91	0.65
EM1: Multisensory engagement	0.82			
EM2: Emotional resonance	0.85			
EM3: Intellectual stimulation	0.78			
EM4: Relational interaction	0.84			
EM5: Behavioral participation	0.76			
Perceived Authenticity (PA)		0.90	0.92	0.71
PA1: Cultural preservation	0.88			
PA2: Architectural integrity	0.81			
PA3: Genuine local interactions	0.85			
PA4: Uncommercialized atmosphere	0.84			
Tourist Loyalty (TL)		0.89	0.91	0.68
TL1: Intention to revisit	0.87			
TL2: Resistance to alternatives	0.80			
TL3: Destination preference	0.83			
TL4: Long-term commitment	0.81			
Word-of-Mouth (WoM)		0.86	0.89	0.64
WoM1: Positive recommendations	0.82			
WoM2: Electronic advocacy (eWOM)	0.79			
WoM3: Encouraging others to visit	0.81			
WoM4: Sharing memorable experiences	0.78			

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Assessment utilizing the Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Latent Construct	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Experiential Marketing	0.806			
(2) Perceived Authenticity	0.645	0.843		
(3) Tourist Loyalty	0.589	0.712	0.825	
(4) Word-of-Mouth	0.610	0.684	0.655	0.800

indirect relationships, a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure utilizing 5,000 randomized resamples was executed to generate precise t-statistics and corresponding p-values. The analysis of the direct effects provided strong empirical support for the first five hypotheses. Experiential Marketing demonstrated a significant positive direct effect on Tourist Loyalty ($\beta = 0.285$, $t = 4.75$, $p < 0.001$) and Word-of-Mouth ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 5.12$, $p < 0.001$), thus validating H1 and H2. Furthermore, a highly substantial positive direct effect was observed between Experiential Marketing and Perceived Authenticity ($\beta = 0.645$, $t = 12.84$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H3 and underscoring the critical role of sensory and emotional engagements in fostering a sense of genuineness. Subsequently,

Perceived Authenticity was found to exert a massive positive influence on both Tourist Loyalty ($\beta = 0.528$, $t = 9.45$, $p < 0.001$) and Word-of-Mouth ($\beta = 0.483$, $t = 8.16$, $p < 0.001$), leading to the definitive acceptance of H4 and H5. Crucially, the investigation into the indirect mediating pathways provided profound theoretical insights. The bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that Perceived Authenticity acts as a powerful and statistically significant mediator in the relationship between Experiential Marketing and Tourist Loyalty (Indirect Effect $\beta = 0.340$, $t = 7.25$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6. Similarly, the structural pathway from Experiential Marketing to Word-of-Mouth was significantly mediated by Perceived Authenticity (Indirect Effect $\beta = 0.311$, $t = 6.88$, $p < 0.001$), validating H7. The presence of significant direct effects alongside these substantial indirect pathways confirms that Perceived Authenticity functions as a complementary partial mediator, effectively amplifying the positive outcomes generated by experiential marketing initiatives within these rural resort settings.

Table 3: Structural Model Results, Path Coefficients, and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Structural Path Description	Standardized β	T-Value	P-Value	Decision
H1	Experiential Marketing $\rightarrow$ Tourist Loyalty	0.285	4.75	0.000	Supported
H2	Experiential Marketing $\rightarrow$ Word-of-Mouth	0.312	5.12	0.000	Supported
H3	Experiential Marketing $\rightarrow$ Perceived Authenticity	0.645	12.84	0.000	Supported
H4	Perceived Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Tourist Loyalty	0.528	9.45	0.000	Supported
H5	Perceived Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Word-of-Mouth	0.483	8.16	0.000	Supported
H6	Experiential Marketing $\rightarrow$ PA $\rightarrow$ Tourist Loyalty	0.340	7.25	0.000	Supported
H7	Experiential Marketing $\rightarrow$ PA $\rightarrow$ Word-of-Mouth	0.311	6.88	0.000	Supported

V. Discussion

The primary objective of this empirical investigation was to systematically untangle and evaluate the complex structural relationships existing among experiential marketing, perceived authenticity, tourist loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy within the highly

specialized context of ecotourism resorts in Guilan Province. The comprehensive data analysis, executed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), provided robust statistical support for all seven proposed hypotheses, thereby validating the conceptual framework and offering profound theoretical and contextual insights into contemporary tourism dynamics. Commencing with the direct pathways, the empirical results unequivocally confirmed that experiential marketing exerts a highly significant and positive direct influence on both tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth, strongly validating Hypotheses 1 and 2. These findings corroborate and significantly extend the existing body of knowledge, harmonizing with recent empirical studies which assert that in an era characterized by intense destination substitutability, the mere provision of functional accommodation is critically insufficient for securing long-term behavioral commitment (Aarabe et al., 2026; Liliyan & Luqmana, 2025). Within the localized context of Guilan, when ecotourism operators transcend traditional service delivery and strategically orchestrate immersive, multisensory environments—ranging from the tactile engagement with indigenous handicrafts and the olfactory stimulation of traditional regional gastronomy to the intellectual enrichment derived from local folklore—they effectively catalyze a profound emotional resonance. This multisensory marketing approach, as previously evidenced in broader tourism and transportation sectors (Pendar, Khoshshima, & Veisi, 2020; Tajzadeh Namin & Tajzadeh Namin, 2024), effectively transforms a passive vacation into an active, memorable psychological episode, thereby directly reinforcing the tourist's conative intention to revisit the province and simultaneously stimulating their intrinsic motivation to broadcast these positive narratives across both interpersonal networks and digital electronic platforms (eWOM).

Furthermore, the structural analysis revealed a remarkably strong and positive direct relationship between experiential marketing and perceived authenticity, providing compelling evidence for Hypothesis 3. This specific finding is of paramount theoretical importance as it empirically demonstrates that authenticity in the modern ecotourism landscape is not an entirely static, pre-existing historical artifact, but rather a dynamic cognitive perception that can be significantly enhanced and actively cultivated through deliberate experiential interventions. When resorts meticulously design their environments to facilitate genuine, unscripted interactions between the guests and the host community, and when they actively preserve and showcase traditional architectural aesthetics and local customs without succumbing to overt commercialization, they provide the necessary sensory and emotional cues that tourists utilize to evaluate the genuineness of the destination. This aligns flawlessly with the multidisciplinary perspectives which argue that an authentic quality experience serves as a fundamental catalyst for establishing profound trust and perceived value in heritage and rural tourism settings (Suryanadi et al., 2026). The results strongly suggest that the tourists visiting Guilan do not inherently perceive the region as authentic simply by virtue of its geographic location; rather, their perception of authenticity is actively constructed and solidified through the quality, depth, and sincerity of the experiential marketing stimuli they encounter during their stay. Consequently, the operationalization of experiential marketing serves as the primary vehicle through which the abstract concept of rural authenticity is rendered tangible, digestible,

and emotionally impactful for the contemporary traveler.

Delving into the behavioral consequences of this perceived genuineness, the empirical results robustly validated Hypotheses 4 and 5, demonstrating that perceived authenticity exerts a massive, positive direct effect on both tourist loyalty and the generation of word-of-mouth. In the context of ecotourism, where the target demographic is inherently motivated by a desire to escape the artificiality of urban commercialism and seek profound, meaningful connections with nature and local cultures, authenticity emerges as the ultimate determinant of satisfaction and subsequent behavioral intent. Tourists who evaluate their stay at a Guilan resort as highly authentic exhibit a significantly stronger psychological attachment to the destination, which dramatically elevates their resistance to competitive offerings and solidifies their commitment to future visitation. This finding is highly consistent with recent literature examining the critical role of brand authenticity in heritage and sacred tourism domains, wherein authenticity acts as the core driver of destination image, perceived value, and subsequent conative loyalty (Das & Kondasani, 2026; Shi et al., 2022). Simultaneously, this profound sense of authenticity acts as a powerful psychological trigger for advocacy. Because authentic experiences are increasingly rare and highly valued in the modern tourism market, tourists are intrinsically compelled to share their genuine discoveries with their peers. This manifests in enthusiastic, highly credible word-of-mouth recommendations and the proliferation of positive eWOM on global digital platforms, a dynamic that is heavily reliant on the underlying trust and emotional affection generated by the authentic encounter (Aldulaimi et al., 2025; Fu, 2025; Tanaka et al., 2024).

The most significant and theoretically novel contribution of this research, however, lies in the validation of Hypotheses 6 and 7, which confirmed the powerful mediating role of perceived authenticity in the structural pathways linking experiential marketing to both tourist loyalty and word-of-mouth. The bootstrapping mediation analysis proved that while experiential marketing can directly influence behavioral outcomes, its efficacy is drastically amplified when it successfully engenders a perception of profound authenticity within the tourist's psyche. This partial mediation implies a complex, sequential psychological mechanism: experiential marketing provides the necessary multisensory and relational stimuli; these stimuli are subsequently processed and evaluated by the tourist to ascertain the genuineness and cultural integrity of the destination (perceived authenticity); and it is this finalized, internalized perception of authenticity that ultimately solidifies their long-term loyalty and drives them to act as enthusiastic brand advocates. If an ecotourism resort implements sophisticated experiential marketing strategies that are perceived by the tourist as staged, highly commercialized, or culturally disconnected—often termed as "staged authenticity"—the structural mechanism breaks down. In such scenarios, the lack of perceived authenticity will significantly attenuate the positive impacts of the experiential stimuli, failing to convert transient satisfaction into enduring loyalty or credible word-of-mouth. This finding critically extends existing frameworks by demonstrating that in specialized niches like the Guilan ecotourism sector, experiential marketing cannot operate in a vacuum; it must be inextricably tethered to the genuine, verifiable cultural and environmental realities of the host destination

(Ghosh et al., 2026; Suo & Huang, 2023). Therefore, perceived authenticity acts as the indispensable cognitive bridge and the ultimate validating mechanism that transforms a well-marketed tourist activity into a profoundly meaningful, loyalty-inducing, and heavily recommended life experience.

VI. Conclusion and Practical Implications

The present study successfully conceptualized and empirically validated a comprehensive structural model delineating the intricate relationships among experiential marketing, perceived authenticity, tourist loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy within the specialized and highly competitive context of ecotourism resorts in Guilan Province, Iran. By leveraging rigorous quantitative methodologies and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) on a robust sample collected during the 2025 tourism season, the research conclusively addressed the foundational research questions and validated all seven proposed hypotheses. The overarching conclusion drawn from the empirical data is that experiential marketing is not merely a peripheral promotional tactic, but a fundamental strategic imperative for cultivating enduring tourist loyalty and stimulating organic electronic and interpersonal advocacy in rural tourism environments. However, the true efficacy of these multisensory, emotional, and intellectual engagements is entirely contingent upon their ability to generate a profound perception of cultural and environmental authenticity within the tourist. Perceived authenticity emerged as the critical linchpin—a powerful mediating mechanism that filters, validates, and amplifies the effects of experiential marketing. In essence, while beautifully orchestrated experiences capture the tourist's immediate attention and satisfaction, it is the underlying, verifiable genuineness of the cultural encounter that transforms that transient satisfaction into deep-seated conative loyalty and enthusiastic brand advocacy. The integration of these variables into a cohesive nomological network significantly advances the existing tourism marketing literature, proving that in niche markets characterized by an inherent demand for originality, the synergy between experiential design and authentic preservation is the ultimate determinant of sustained competitive advantage.

From a managerial and operational perspective, these robust empirical findings offer a multitude of highly actionable, evidence-based strategic implications for ecotourism operators, destination management organizations (DMOs), and regional policymakers striving to optimize the economic and socio-cultural impact of tourism in Guilan Province. First and foremost, resort managers must transition away from traditional, functional service delivery models and systematically invest in holistic experiential marketing frameworks. This requires a meticulous orchestration of the physical and interactive environment to stimulate all sensory touchpoints. For instance, operators should prioritize the integration of localized olfactory and gustatory elements by offering highly traditional, locally sourced Guilan cuisine, thereby directly supporting the agricultural production function of the region and aligning economic growth with equitable income distribution across local supply chains. The auditory environment should reflect the natural soundscapes of the coastal and forested regions, minimizing unnatural noise pollution, while the tactile

experiences can be enhanced through interactive workshops where tourists engage directly with local artisans in traditional crafts. Such immersive intellectual and relational stimuli not only differentiate the resort from generic hospitality offerings but directly fuel the psychological resonance required to secure long-term visitation intentions and resist competitive alternatives. Furthermore, given the pronounced impact of experiential marketing on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), operators must actively facilitate and encourage the digital sharing of these experiences. Creating visually striking, culturally significant physical spaces within the resort naturally incentivizes tourists to generate and disseminate high-quality user-generated content across social media platforms, thereby acting as highly credible, unpaid digital ambassadors for the destination.

Crucially, the confirmation of perceived authenticity as a powerful mediator dictates a profound paradigm shift in how experiential marketing is executed; managers must exercise extreme caution to avoid the perilous trap of "staged authenticity." The findings mandate that all experiential interventions must be deeply and genuinely anchored in the authentic cultural, historical, and environmental realities of Guilan Province. Resort architecture must strictly adhere to vernacular designs utilizing indigenous materials, rather than adopting superficial or highly commercialized imitations of rural life. Similarly, the interactions between the host staff and the tourists must transcend scripted, transactional customer service. Hiring staff exclusively from local communities and empowering them to share their personal narratives, folklore, and cultural heritage fosters a sincere, uncommercialized atmosphere that modern tourists utilize to validate their experiences. If an experiential marketing initiative—no matter how financially costly or visually impressive—is perceived by the tourist as contrived or overtly commodified, it will fail to activate the mediating pathway of authenticity, thereby severely truncating its capacity to generate loyalty or positive word-of-mouth. To ensure sustained compliance with these authenticity parameters, regional policymakers and DMOs should implement standardized accreditation programs and supportive structural frameworks, such as optimized tax efficiencies for resorts that demonstrably invest in genuine cultural preservation and local community integration. While this study provides comprehensive insights into the Guilan ecotourism sector, future research endeavors should aim to longitudinally track these behavioral outcomes to assess the temporal durability of experiential loyalty, and potentially incorporate moderating variables such as tourists' cultural backgrounds, psychological involvement, and prior destination familiarity to further refine the applicability of this structural model across diverse global tourism contexts.

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