

From Preservation of Innovation: Rethinking Heritage Tourism Competitiveness in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of Malaysia's most dynamic sectors, with Malacca (Melaka) standing out as a UNESCO World Heritage site and a cultural gateway that embodies the nation's historical identity. However, the state's tourism industry continues to face post-pandemic challenges, including reduced international arrivals, uneven digital adoption, and growing concerns over the commercialization of heritage assets. While initiatives such as augmented reality trails, smart trishaws, and the Smart Heritage Tourism Super-App illustrate the potential of innovation, traditional family-run enterprises struggle with financial and technological barriers, raising questions about inclusivity and sustainability. This study positions cultural heritage, constructive authenticity, and product/service diversification as key antecedents of innovative tourism in heritage-rich destinations. By extending beyond conventional perspectives of innovation that emphasize technological novelty or organizational capabilities, the study proposes an integrative framework that foregrounds cultural embeddedness, experiential value, and community agency. Findings suggest that innovation in heritage tourism is not confined to digital tools or economic performance but involves co-creating authentic, heritage-rooted experiences that strengthen destination identity, enhance visitor satisfaction, and build resilience. The research underscores that strategic alignment of cultural preservation with technological adoption can accelerate recovery and long-term competitiveness in destinations like Malacca. Theoretically, it reframes tourism innovation by integrating authenticity and diversification into existing models. Practically, it offers guidance for policymakers, planners, and local enterprises on fostering inclusive and sustainable innovation that safeguards cultural integrity while embracing digital transformation.

Keywords: heritage tourism; innovation; constructive authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a key driver of global economic growth, generating over 9% of world GDP and supporting millions of jobs worldwide (UN Tourism, 2023). In Malaysia, the sector is central to economic diversification, ranking as the second-largest source of foreign exchange earnings before the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2024, tourism generated RM 291.9 billion, contributing 15.1% of national GDP, with arrivals surpassing 29 million, signaling a strong rebound (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025).

Malacca (Melaka), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, represents one of Malaysia's most iconic cultural tourism destinations. Despite its small size, the state attracts international visitors from China, Singapore, and Indonesia, positioning itself as a gateway to Malaysia's cultural identity through its slogan "*Visiting Malacca Means Visiting Malaysia*." Heritage landmarks such as St. Paul's Church, Jonker Street, and the Baba-Nyonya heritage houses highlight Malacca's cultural and historical significance (Candan, 2023). Recent scholarship emphasizes that community-based tourism (CBT) in Malacca enhances local participation, preserves traditions, and strengthens socio-economic resilience (Abdullah et al., 2024).

Innovation is increasingly shaping the trajectory of Malacca's tourism. Augmented reality applications such as *Exp AR Malacca* enrich visitors learning about Malay heritage houses (Azhar et al., 2025), while the state government is developing a Smart Heritage Tourism Super-App to integrate AI, VR, and AR for immersive visitor experiences (Malay Mail, 2024). At the same time, scholars caution that innovation must be balanced with authenticity, as over-commercialisation risks undermining the very heritage experiences that draw visitors (Tan, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented collapse in Malaysia's tourism sector, with international arrivals plummeting by 80% between 2020 and 2021 (Rahman, 2024). Malacca, as a prominent heritage destination, was disproportionately affected. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) particularly those involved in handicrafts, cultural retail, and traditional food services, experienced widespread closures, and financial distress. Although signs of recovery are emerging, international arrivals remain inconsistent. Notably, Chinese tourist numbers have yet to rebound to pre-pandemic levels, and domestic tourism spending has proven insufficient to fully offset the losses (Chen et al., 2024).

A second challenge lies in the uneven adoption of digital technologies. While Malacca has introduced innovative initiatives such as augmented reality (AR) heritage trails and smart trishaw services (The Star, 2025), many local tourism operators, especially older, family-run businesses remain reluctant to embrace digital tools. Barriers include financial constraints, technological complexity, and concerns about cultural appropriateness (Kassim & Lee, 2023). This digital divide undermines Malacca's competitiveness relative to other ASEAN heritage destinations that have successfully implemented integrated digital ecosystems.

A third concern involves the erosion of cultural authenticity. The commercial transformation of heritage assets such as the conversion of historic shophouses into retail outlets along Jonker Street has sparked debate over the preservation of cultural identity and equitable community benefits (Shahahr, 2014). Scholars emphasize that balancing innovation with authenticity is essential to maintaining visitor satisfaction and long-term destination loyalty (Tan, 2025).

Considering these challenges, this study investigates the evolving landscape of Malacca's tourism sector. It explores how innovation, authenticity, and community engagement can be strategically aligned to accelerate post-pandemic recovery and foster sustainable growth in heritage tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism industry has long been perceived as less innovative than industrial or technological sectors. This perception arises from tourism's service-based nature, where innovation is often intangible and experiential rather than product-centric. However, recent scholarship increasingly challenges this view, emphasizing that innovation in tourism is multifaceted, encompassing digital transformation, sustainability, and stakeholder co-creation (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Sigala, 2023). Scholars continue to debate the coexistence of product and service innovation in tourism, as well as the unique features that shape innovation dynamics within this sector (Hall & Williams, 2008). Central themes in the literature include the characteristics of tourism innovation, methodological challenges in evaluation, and the applicability of existing innovation models.

Traditional innovation metrics, especially those designed for national or regional assessments, are frequently criticized for their inadequacy in capturing firm-level innovation in tourism (Hall & Williams, 2008). Tourism's interdisciplinary nature, spanning cultural, social, and technological domains, renders standard service-industry instruments insufficient (Tribe, 1997; Liburd, 2012). To address these limitations, Camisón and Monfort-Mir (2012) proposed a comprehensive scoreboard framework integrating organizational and technological dimensions, grounded in dynamic capabilities and Schumpeterian theory.

Schumpeter's innovation theory conceptualizes innovation both as an outcome (e.g., new products or services) and as a process. From a resource-based view, innovation is a capability that sustains competitive advantage (Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012). This perspective remains influential in tourism research, particularly in empirical studies examining how innovation processes affect firm performance (Novelli et al., 2006). More recently, scholars have emphasized the role of open innovation in tourism, highlighting its potential to foster stakeholder collaboration, co-create experiences, and drive digital and organizational transformation (Gretzel et al., 2022; Mariani & Mura, 2023).

Organizational and market conditions continue to shape decisions around incremental versus radical innovation (López-Fernández et al., 2009; Orfila-Sintes et al., 2005). Incremental innovations typically enhance service delivery or customer experience, while radical innovations may introduce entirely new tourism products or business models. Technological advancements, especially in ICT have emerged as key drivers of innovation. The integration of AI, IoT, blockchain, and extended reality technologies has revolutionized how tourism products are marketed, delivered, and consumed (Neuhofer, 2021; Tussyadiah, 2023).

Recent studies underscore the strategic imperative of digital transformation for tourism SMEs, linking it to improved firm performance and long-term competitiveness (Buhalis & Leung, 2022). Moreover, digital platforms are increasingly recognized for their role in advancing sustainability goals, particularly within the industry 4.0 and emerging Industry 5.0 paradigms (Sigala, 2023; Xiang et al., 2024). These platforms facilitate eco-conscious travel, operational efficiency, and inclusive growth, while also raising concerns around digital dependency and data governance.

Tourism innovation research now calls for nuanced evaluation frameworks that reflect the interplay of organizational capabilities, technological change, and market dynamics. As the sector embraces digital transformation and sustainability imperatives, innovation is no longer optional it is a strategic necessity. The transition toward smart tourism ecosystems and human-centric innovation models further reinforces the need for adaptive strategies that balance technological advancement with authentic, sustainable experiences (Gretzel et al., 2022; Mariani & Mura, 2023).

Malacca

The Straits of Malacca have long functioned as one of the most significant maritime routes, facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and communication between East and West. Its strategic position attracted diverse immigrant populations and sustained interactions with both neighboring and distant regions. These encounters nurtured the rise of powerful kingdoms and thriving urban centers, shaping a distinctly multicultural identity. The kingdom and city of Malacca emerged in the late 14th or early 15th century, when a modest fishing village rapidly expanded into a bustling port and international emporium (UNESCO, 2008). The city's growing importance soon drew the attention of colonial powers. Driven by economic interests tied to capitalism and maritime dominance, Malacca became a contested site among the Portuguese, Dutch, and later the British (Gallaher et al., 2009). The Portuguese conquest in 1511 marked the beginning of a long colonial era, which spanned the entire European colonial period in Asia from the early 16th to the mid-20th century. These successive regimes left behind layered cultural, political, and architectural imprints that continue to define the urban fabric of Malacca today. Recent scholarship emphasizes how colonial architectural forms, particularly Moorish, Mughal, and European styles, were hybridized with local influences to create enduring urban landscapes (Md Yasin et al., 2023).

Malacca's cosmopolitan character, however, was not solely a product of colonial encounters. Its identity was equally shaped by the contributions of diverse local and migrant communities. Over centuries, Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions blended with vernacular cultures, creating a peaceful yet dynamic layering of social practices and material expressions. This hybridity is particularly evident in the city's religious and civic architecture. Studies of mosques such as Tengkeria Mosque and Masjid Lama Machap, for instance, reveal distinct acculturation processes where Malay, Chinese, and Javanese design elements merged with imported materials and decorative motifs (Yaman et al., 2023; Jaafar et al., 2023). These examples underscore how religious architecture became an active site of cultural negotiation and material hybridity.

Culturally and geographically, Malacca's boundaries have always been porous and fluid, intersecting with wider Southeast Asian trade networks. Since antiquity, continuous waves of migration, intermarriage, and commercial interaction have given rise to hybridized cultural identities and richly fused material cultures. Such exchanges are visible not only in architecture but also in cuisine, language, and everyday practices. Research into Melaka's dock spaces and waterfronts highlights how maritime infrastructures have historically shaped urban morphology, linking local settlements to the broader Indian Ocean and maritime Silk Road networks (Mo, 2024). In the contemporary era, Malacca's heritage status has brought both opportunities and challenges. The designation as

a UNESCO World Heritage Site has elevated the city's profile, but it has also introduced tensions between conservation, development, and tourism. Studies reveal that adaptive reuse of colonial-era shophouses has boosted the economy and enhanced urban conservation, though it risks alienating local communities if authenticity is compromised (Mohamad et al., 2023). Similarly, research on sea reclamation projects highlights potential risks to heritage zones, underscoring the fragile balance between modern development and historical preservation (UKM, 2021). At the same time, both residents and tourists increasingly voice concerns about sustainability and building conservation, reflecting the evolving role of heritage as a shared cultural and economic asset (Hilmi et al., 2023; Mohd et al., 2021).

Understanding Malacca's urban development therefore requires situating it within multiple perspectives: the ambitions of colonial powers, the lived contributions of cosmopolitan communities, and the heritage management policies of the Malaysian government following independence. Together, these forces illustrate how Malacca evolved from a strategic trading hub into a multicultural heritage city one whose layered history and cosmopolitan identity remain central to its urban morphology and global recognition today.

Schumpeterian Innovation in Tourism

Schumpeterian innovation, derived from the economic theories of Joseph Schumpeter, offers a foundational lens through which tourism innovation can be understood. Schumpeter (1934) conceptualized innovation as the primary driver of economic development, emphasizing the role of entrepreneurs in introducing new combinations of resources, technologies, and organizational forms. His framework identifies five types of innovation: (1) the introduction of new products or services, (2) new methods of production, (3) the opening of new markets, (4) new sources of supply, and (5) new organizational structures.

In the tourism sector, these types of innovation are increasingly evident. For example, the development of immersive digital heritage experiences such as augmented reality (AR) overlays of historical buildings in Malacca (Azhar et al., 2025) represents both product and process innovation. Similarly, the emergence of smart tourism ecosystems and AI-powered travel platforms reflects new organizational and technological paradigms (Gretzel et al., 2022; Sigala, 2023). A key concept in Schumpeterian theory is creative destruction, which refers to the process by which innovation disrupts and replaces outdated practices. In tourism, this is visible in the shift from traditional booking systems to mobile apps, from static museum displays to interactive digital storytelling, and from mass tourism models to personalized, data-driven experiences (Tussyadiah, 2023). These transformations not only enhance visitor satisfaction but also redefine competitive advantage in heritage destinations. Moreover, Schumpeterian innovation aligns with resource-based and dynamic capabilities perspectives, which view innovation as a strategic capability that enables firms to adapt, evolve, and sustain performance in changing environments (Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012). In heritage tourism, this capability is often expressed through the integration of cultural assets with digital technologies, stakeholder co-creation, and diversified service offerings (Mariani & Mura, 2023).

In summary, Schumpeterian innovation provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing how tourism destinations particularly those rich in cultural heritage can leverage innovation to enhance competitiveness, authenticity, and sustainability. Its relevance is especially pronounced in post-pandemic recovery contexts, where digital transformation and experiential diversification are central to tourism resilience and growth.

Cultural Heritage and Authenticity

Tourism in heritage destinations is increasingly shaped by the dynamic interplay among cultural heritage, authenticity, and innovation. This is especially true in Malacca, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where both tangible assets (colonial architecture, traditional Malay houses, art districts) and intangible heritage (culinary traditions, festivals, multicultural practices) form the backbone of destination identity.

Recent empirical work documents how cultural tourism in Malacca is evolving beyond traditional heritage preservation towards more interactive, digital forms of engagement. For example, Exp AR Malacca (Azhar,

Saari, Hendriyani, et al., 2025) uses augmented reality mounted on physical maps to overlay 3D models of Malay traditional houses and historical narratives, improving both visitor satisfaction and heritage awareness.

Furthermore, the state government's Smart Heritage Tourism super-app, incorporating AI, VR, AR, and chatbot tools, is being developed to enrich visitor experiences through real-time multilingual translation, curated recommendations, and immersive storytelling (Melaka ICT Holdings et al., 2025). Similar changes are observed in promotional strategies: viral marketing campaigns and digital storytelling are found to have strong influence over tourists' perceptions of Malacca's cultural and culinary offerings (Hor, 2025). These developments support the proposition that cultural heritage, when mediated and enhanced by innovation, significantly strengthens destination competitiveness.

Additional empirical support comes from Luekveerawattana (2024), who found that cultural values, facility capacity, and tourism management practices significantly influence innovation in heritage tourism. Di Leo (2023) also demonstrated that technology-enhanced museum experiences improve visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Broader literature supports these findings. Innovation in tourism is increasingly recognized as a strategic necessity, especially in heritage contexts where digital transformation and sustainability imperatives converge (Sigala, 2023; Gretzel et al., 2022). Schumpeterian and resource-based perspectives frame innovation as both an outcome and a capability (Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012), while open innovation models emphasize stakeholder co-creation and experiential enhancement (Mariani & Mura, 2023).

Constructive Authenticity

Innovation has emerged as a key pillar in post-COVID-19 recovery for heritage tourism. Technological adoption in Malacca now ranges from micro-innovations to transformative digital infrastructure. Traditional modes of tourism, such as trishaw rides, are being upgraded with digital IDs, QR code integrations, and online booking systems to improve service quality and regulatory oversight (The Star, 2025). Meanwhile, the hospitality sector is diversifying: the opening of Dusit Princess Melaka in mid-2025 highlights demand for upscale accommodation and MICE tourism, reflecting an industry repositioning toward premium offerings (Travel and Tour World, 2025). Authenticity continues to play a necessary role in how tourists accept and evaluate innovation. The concept of constructive authenticity where authenticity is understood through the tourist's perceptions, rituals, and cultural meaning rather than strict historical accuracy (Wang, 1999) is particularly relevant. Interactive and staged heritage experiences, such as festivals, performances, or reconstructed colonial narratives, reinforced through digital tools, appear to influence tourist satisfaction significantly (Azhar et al., 2025; Tan, 2025).

Empirical studies reinforce this. Lee et al. (2024) found that constructive authenticity significantly enhances existential authenticity, memorability, and satisfaction in heritage tourism. Zhang et al. (2025) showed that digital engagement tools like AR and VR increase perceived authenticity and recommendation intentions at World Heritage Sites.

Diverse Products and Services

A third dimension gaining prominence is diversification of tourism products and services, which responds to increasingly sophisticated and segmented tourist demands. In Malacca, diverse offerings now include heritage architecture tours, culinary festivals, boutique accommodations, creative arts districts, and immersive tech-enhanced experiences. For instance, community priorities are reflected in studies that identify strategic paths for Malacca to evolve into an artistic hub through public art installations, cultural incubators, and creative festivals—balanced with infrastructure and technology (Noh & Imron, 2025). Restoration projects (e.g., Masjid Lama Machap), government heritage-cuisine events, and heritage walks that bundle food, cultural attire, and traditional crafts (Bernama, 2024) serve not only cultural preservation but also service and product innovation.

Empirical evidence from Jilin, China, shows a strong coupling between intangible cultural heritage and tourism diversification, with coordinated development enhancing regional competitiveness. Demiröz et al. (2025) proposed a taxonomy linking fourteen heritage resources to eleven tourism types, emphasizing the role of diversified offerings in sustainable cultural tourism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

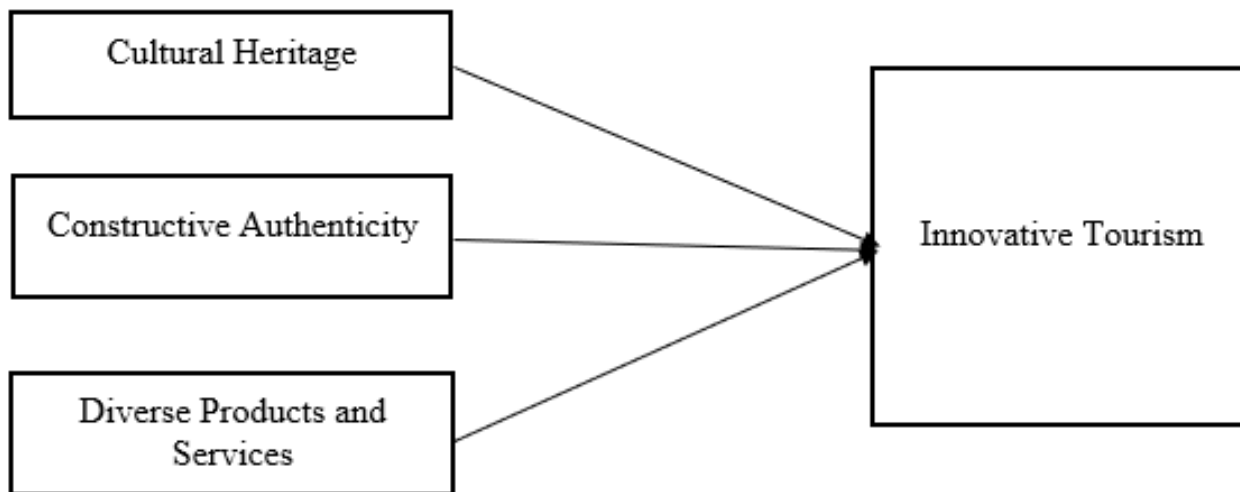


Figure 1. Framework of this study

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the theoretical advancement of tourism innovation by positioning cultural heritage, constructive authenticity, and product or service diversification as central antecedents of innovative tourism, particularly within heritage-rich destinations such as Malacca. While previous research has predominantly conceptualized innovation through Schumpeterian perspectives emphasizing technological novelty, product development, and process efficiency (Hall & Williams, 2008) or through resource-based views that highlight organizational capabilities and absorptive capacity (Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012), this study proposes a more integrative framework. By incorporating experiential, cultural, and community-oriented dimensions, the findings underscore that innovation in tourism is not confined to digital transformation or economic performance. Instead, it encompasses the co-creation of authentic, heritage-rooted experiences that enhance destination identity, visitor satisfaction, and long-term competitiveness.

The study also reinforces the relevance of constructive authenticity (Wang, 1999) in shaping tourists' perceptions and evaluations of innovation. Rather than relying solely on historical accuracy, authenticity is increasingly understood as a dynamic construct mediated by digital tools, cultural narratives, and participatory experiences. This has profound implications for heritage tourism, where interactive storytelling, AR/VR applications, and community-led initiatives can simultaneously preserve cultural integrity and foster innovation. The findings align with recent scholarship advocating for hybrid models of innovation that bridge technological advancement with cultural sustainability and social inclusion (Sigala, 2023; Gretzel et al., 2022).

Implication

From a theoretical standpoint, the proposed framework challenges conventional economic models of innovation by emphasizing cultural embeddedness, experiential value, and community agency. It calls for a reorientation of tourism innovation theory toward multi-dimensional constructs that integrate heritage, authenticity, and diversification. This approach complements existing innovation paradigms while extending their applicability to heritage tourism contexts, where socio-cultural factors are central to value creation.

Practically, the findings offer strategic guidance for destination managers, tourism planners, and policymakers. Investment in heritage preservation, authentic experience design, and diversified tourism products emerge as a triad of innovation levers. These strategies not only enhance competitiveness but also align with sustainability imperatives, including cultural vitality, community engagement, and inclusive development. In Malacca, for instance, initiatives such as the Smart Heritage Tourism super-app and AR-enhanced cultural trails exemplify how innovation can be rooted in local identity while leveraging global technologies.

From a policy perspective, innovation strategies should extend beyond infrastructure and digitalization to include cultural programming, creative industries support, and community participation frameworks. This ensures that innovation is not extractive or commercialized at the expense of cultural authenticity but is instead inclusive, adaptive, and resilient.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, constructs such as authenticity and heritage are highly context dependent. What is perceived as authentic in Malacca may not resonate in other cultural settings, limiting the generalizability of findings across regions or cultures (Wang, 1999). Second, while the framework focuses on three primary antecedents, it does not explicitly account for systemic forces such as governance structures, digital infrastructure, and entrepreneurial ecosystems, which are known to influence innovation outcomes (Orfila-Sintes et al., 2005).

Third, the framework remains conceptual and draws on existing literature for support. There is a need for empirical validation through quantitative testing, comparative case studies, and longitudinal research to establish the strength and directionality of proposed relationships. Lastly, there is a risk of over-romanticizing authenticity and heritage. Without critical reflection, innovation strategies may inadvertently lead to commercialization or cultural commodification, marginalizing local voices or distorting cultural narratives (Tribe, 1997; Liburd, 2012).

Future Research Directions

Building on these insights, several avenues for future research are proposed. First, empirical studies should test the framework across diverse cultural and geographical contexts to assess its robustness and adaptability. Comparative research between heritage destinations in Southeast Asia, Europe, and Latin America could yield valuable insights into cross-cultural dynamics of innovation.

Second, scholars should explore the interaction between digital transformation and heritage-based innovation, examining how technologies such as AI, AR, and smart tourism platforms mediate authenticity, engagement, and satisfaction (Gretzel et al., 2022; Tussyadiah, 2023). Third, longitudinal research is needed to investigate how innovation strategies evolve over time, particularly in response to external shocks such as pandemics, climate change, or geopolitical shifts. This would enhance understanding of resilience and adaptability in heritage tourism.

Fourth, future studies should examine how local communities co-create, perceive, and benefit from tourism innovation. This includes exploring models of participatory governance, cultural entrepreneurship, and resident-tourist dynamics (Richards, 2018). Finally, integrating sustainability-oriented service innovation (SOSI) frameworks can help assess how innovation aligns with environmental protection, social inclusion, and economic resilience. This is particularly relevant for heritage destinations facing pressures of over tourism and cultural erosion.

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