MSI Journal of
AI and Technology

Volume: 2, Issue: 4 (Oct-Dec 2026)
Published by *MSI Publishers*
ISSN 3107-6181 (Online)

Received: 19-10-2026
Accepted: 12-11-2026
Published: 16-11-2026

Generative AI and Cultural Heritage Tourism: A Narrative Review of Digital Interpretation, Authenticity, and Visitor Engagement

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ABSTRACT: Purpose: Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), including large language models (LLMs) and text-to-image systems, is increasingly used to interpret cultural heritage for visitors. Evidence on how it affects perceived authenticity and visitor behavior is scattered across tourism, museum studies and human–computer interaction. This review maps that evidence and proposes an integrated conceptual framework.

Design/methodology/approach: A structured narrative review was conducted in November 2026. Targeted searches of indexed journals, conference proceedings, publisher platforms and institutional repositories identified 11 sources from 2023–2026 that met predefined criteria. They were synthesized thematically and organized with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) and Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) frameworks. The review is not a PRISMA systematic review, and its limits are stated explicitly.

Findings: Four themes emerged: (1) interpretive formats and architectures, (2) the contested nature of perceived authenticity, (3) trust-based pathways from GenAI use to behavioral intentions and preservation awareness, and (4) curatorial, disclosure and governance conditions. Evidence is mixed on whether AI-generated content is judged more or less authentic than human-made content, and it depends strongly on disclosure and on visitors' prior knowledge. Evidence on heritage stewardship outcomes is very limited.

DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24272841*

Originality/value: The paper links authenticity dimensions, trust and attachment, and institutional conditions in one SOR–TOE framework, derives six testable propositions, and sets out a research agenda that highlights underrepresented contexts and outcomes.

Keywords: *generative AI; large language models; cultural heritage tourism; digital interpretation; perceived authenticity; trust; visitor engagement; narrative review*

1. Introduction

Heritage interpretation has traditionally relied on fixed media such as text panels, printed guides and pre-recorded audio (Tilden, 1957). Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) changes this by producing text, images and dialogue on demand. Large language models (LLMs), sometimes combined with retrieval-augmented generation (RAG; Lewis et al., 2020), allow museums and heritage sites to offer conversational guides that adapt to the visitor (Trichopoulos et al., 2023). Tourism scholars have also identified cultural and heritage tourism as one of the areas where ChatGPT-type tools are likely to have major implications (Sigala et al., 2024).

The same properties that make GenAI attractive create a tension for heritage. Interpretation depends on factual care and cultural sensitivity, whereas generative models produce output through statistical prediction and can state falsehoods fluently (Ji et al., 2023). Visitors' judgments of whether such content is authentic (Wang, 1999) and trustworthy therefore become central to whether GenAI supports or undermines heritage experiences.

Research on these questions is growing quickly but is dispersed. Tourism studies examine authenticity, trust and behavioral intentions (Bui et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2026). Human–computer interaction studies build and test heritage systems and co-creation workflows (He et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2026). Critical and conceptual work questions authenticity, bias and human agency (Foka & Griffin, 2024; Spennemann, 2024; Ocón et al., 2026; Wecker & Kuflik, n.d.), and other studies ask whether AI-generated heritage interpretations deepen cultural memory (Wang et al., 2025). To our knowledge, these streams have not been brought together around heritage visitors' authenticity judgments and outcomes. This review aims to do so, guided by three questions:

RQ1. What interpretive uses of GenAI in heritage and cultural tourism settings have been studied, and with what designs?

 DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24272841*

RQ2. What does the evidence say about how GenAI-mediated interpretation affects visitors' perceived authenticity and trust?

RQ3. Through which pathways, and under which institutional conditions, does GenAI use relate to visitor engagement, behavioral intentions and preservation-oriented outcomes?

The paper contributes (a) a transparent, bounded synthesis of recent evidence, (b) an integrated SOR–TOE framework with propositions, and (c) a research agenda that identifies where evidence is missing.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Authenticity in heritage experiences

Authenticity is commonly treated as multidimensional. *Objective* authenticity concerns the genuineness of the object or site, *constructive* authenticity concerns meanings attributed by people and contexts, and *existential* authenticity concerns an activated state of being during the experience (Wang, 1999). GenAI can influence each dimension differently, for example by affecting factual reliability, cultural representation, or the quality of the visitor's direct encounter with the site.

2.2 Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR)

The SOR framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) proposes that environmental stimuli shape internal states, which in turn drive behavior. Here, the stimulus is the set of GenAI interpretive features (personalized and anthropomorphic dialogue, source grounding, AI-use disclosure, multimodal narrative). The organism is the visitor's psychological state (perceived authenticity, trust, attachment, cultural understanding). The response comprises behavioral intentions, preservation-oriented outcomes and critical engagement.

2.3 Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE)

SOR explains visitor-level processes, but the quality of GenAI interpretation depends on supply-side conditions. The TOE framework (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990) distinguishes technological conditions (e.g., grounding and model quality), organizational conditions (e.g., curatorial oversight and expertise) and environmental conditions (e.g., disclosure rules and governance). Combining SOR and TOE lets the review connect visitor psychology to institutional practice.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Review design and its limits

This is a structured narrative review in the sense of Grant and Booth (2009), with a scoping orientation (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). It is not a systematic review and does not claim PRISMA 2020 compliance (Page et al., 2021), because the search was not run across a fixed set of bibliographic databases with exportable record counts, screening was not performed in duplicate, and no formal quality-scoring instrument was applied. The Page et al. (2021) guidance was used only as a reference for transparent reporting.

3.2 Search strategy

Searches were run on 1september 2026 through a web search engine that returns indexed journal articles, conference proceedings, publisher pages, institutional repositories and preprint servers. Queries combined three concept groups: (i) generative AI terms (generative AI, GenAI, large language model, ChatGPT, chatbot, conversational agent, text-to-image, RAG); (ii) heritage terms (cultural heritage, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, museum, World Heritage); and (iii) outcome terms (authenticity, trust, visitor experience, engagement, interpretation, storytelling, preservation).

3.3 Eligibility criteria

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Aspect	Inclusion	Exclusion
Technology	Generative AI (LLMs, chatbots, text-to-image or other generative systems)	Non-generative AI only (e.g., recommender or classification systems)
Context	Cultural heritage, museums, heritage or cultural tourism; adjacent destination-content studies were included where authenticity or trust was the focus	Purely technical papers with no visitor or audience outcome; non-heritage contexts
Evidence	Empirical (experiment, survey, qualitative, field study), design-science or conceptual papers	News, industry reports, theses, and non-peer-reviewed preprints
Outcomes	Interpretation, authenticity, trust, engagement, learning, intentions or preservation-related outcomes	No outcome relevant to interpretation or visitor response
Period and language	2023–2026; English	Earlier work; other languages

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3.4 Selection, extraction and appraisal

Eleven sources met the criteria and form the evidence base (Table 2). For each, the context, design and sample, GenAI application and principal findings were extracted. One reviewer, working with AI assistance, performed selection and extraction, so no inter-rater agreement is reported. Full texts were read where openly accessible (He et al., 2025); for other sources, the analysis relies on the published abstracts and bibliographic records available at the time. Claims in this review are therefore limited to what those records report. Rather than numerical quality scores, study design and sample size are reported in Table 2 so that readers can judge strength of evidence. Synthesis was thematic: findings were coded inductively, grouped into themes, and then mapped onto SOR and TOE categories.

4. Results

4.1 Profile of the evidence base

The 11 sources comprise seven empirical studies with human participants, two design-oriented or system-building studies, and two conceptual or expert-opinion papers (Table 2). Two empirical tourism studies concern AI-generated destination imagery rather than heritage sites specifically but were retained because they address authenticity, the central construct of this review. Sample sizes in the heritage-specific human-computer interaction studies are small (20 to 26 participants), whereas survey and experimental studies are larger. Only one study reports a field study in a museum with a comparison group (Wang et al., 2026). No study in the set was conducted in the Middle East or North Africa.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sources included in the review

ID	Source	Context	Design and sample	GenAI application and main findings
S1	Bui et al. (2024)	Destination imagery	Experiment comparing AI- vs. human-made photos, labelled and unlabelled	AI-generated destination images. Perceived authenticity raised trust and patronage intentions; authenticity was higher for human-made images, yet significant for AI images, especially when unlabelled
S2	Trichopoulos et al. (2023)	Museum guide	System design and case-study evaluation	ChatGPT-4-based guide (MAGICAL). Highlights the risk of inaccurate or outdated model output and the role of curation and human expertise
S3	He et al.	Heritage	Workshop and	Stable Diffusion used for personal heritage

DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24272841*

	(2025)	sites in China	interviews, n = 20	narratives. AI illuminated, amplified and reinterpreted narratives, but showed detail errors, Western-style bias and stereotypes; participants were less able to spot errors for unfamiliar sites
S4	Han et al. (2026)	Museum, Kaiping Diaolou	Formative study n = 14; pilot n = 18; between-subject museum field study n = 26	Gen-Diaolou, an AI-assisted interactive system. Evidence suggests support for visitors' diachronic understanding and preservation awareness
S5	Kist & Moshfeghi (2026)	UK museums	Audience survey	Conversational agents. 48% of participants voiced concerns; three risks: distraction from collections, erosion of humanistic engagement, and de-personalisation
S6	Wang & Adzharuddin (2025)	Intangible cultural heritage	Qualitative multimodal study	AI-generated cultural depictions. Introduces "synthetic authenticity"; recommends transparent AI marking, stakeholder involvement and digital literacy
S7	Lu et al. (2026)	Cultural tourism	Sequential mixed methods	GenAI as an information medium. Personalized and anthropomorphic features foster trust and attachment, which reduce perceived information cocoons and promote behavioral intentions; self-efficacy in managing misinformation moderates the relationship
S8	Popa (Anghel) (2026)	Destination imagery	Mixed methods with experiment comparing AI-generated and real images	AI-generated images scored higher than real images on credibility, authenticity and travel intention; smaller differences among younger participants; proposes an authenticity labelling framework
S9	Ngo (2026)	Hoi An, Vietnam	Exploratory study	AI-supported personalisation in heritage tourism. Offers exploratory evidence and argues for cautious integration
S10	Wecker & Kuflik (n.d.)	Cultural heritage	Conceptual paper with proposed experimental framework	Conceptualizes authenticity as a trust construct shaped by authorship, transparency and cultural context
S11	Sigala et al. (2024)	Tourism and hospitality	Expert opinion piece	ChatGPT implications across six areas, including cultural and heritage tourism; offers a research agenda

Note. Information is limited to what the cited records report. n = sample size.

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4.2 Theme 1: Interpretive formats and architectures

Studies cover three broad formats. The first is conversational guides powered by LLMs, represented by the MAGICAL museum guide (Trichopoulos et al., 2023). The authors stress that models can propagate misconceptions or outdated knowledge, and that curation and human expertise are needed to keep information reliable. The second is visitor co-creation, in which visitors use text-to-image tools to produce their own heritage narratives (He et al., 2025). The third is integrated AI-assisted learning systems that combine generation with interactive exploration (Wang et al., 2026). A further group examines GenAI as a general information and personalization medium for destinations (Lu et al., 2026; Ngo, 2026). Overall, the evidence is dominated by prototypes and short-term studies; evaluations of long-running deployments at operating heritage sites are absent from the set.

4.3 Theme 2: The contested nature of authenticity

Findings on authenticity are not uniform. Bui et al. (2024) found that human-made destination images were judged more authentic than AI-generated ones, yet AI-generated images still earned meaningful authenticity ratings, especially when not labelled as AI. In contrast, Popa (Anghel) (2026) reports higher mean credibility, authenticity and travel-intention scores for AI-generated images than for real ones, with smaller differences among younger participants. The studies differ in stimuli, samples and measures, so the discrepancy cannot be resolved here, but both indicate that disclosure and audience characteristics matter.

Heritage-specific work adds concerns about representation. In He et al. (2025), participants saw AI output skew toward Western architectural styles and stereotypes, and those who did not know a site well tended to accept inaccurate images and to have their impression of the site shaped by them. Wang and Adzharuddin (2025) describe “synthetic authenticity” in AI-generated intangible heritage and link audience trust to transparent marking and stakeholder involvement, and Wecker and Kuflik (2026) similarly frame authenticity as a trust construct shaped by authorship, transparency and cultural context. In a UK audience survey, Kist and Moshfeghi (2026) found that 48% of participants had concerns about conversational agents in museums, mainly about distraction from collections, loss of

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humanistic engagement and de-personalisation. Table 3 maps this evidence onto the three authenticity dimensions.

Table 3. Evidence on GenAI and authenticity dimensions

Dimension	Potential benefit (evidence)	Potential risk (evidence)
Objective	Grounding and curation can support reliable information (Trichopoulos et al., 2023)	Inaccurate or outdated output (Trichopoulos et al., 2023); detail and cultural-feature errors (He et al., 2025)
Constructive	Visitors can voice local and personal narratives that differ from official accounts (He et al., 2025)	Western-style bias and stereotypes (He et al., 2025); synthetic authenticity and trust concerns (Wang & Adzharuddin, 2025)
Existential	Personal narrative creation can evoke memories and new interpretations (He et al., 2025)	Distraction from collections and loss of humanistic engagement (Kist & Moshfeghi, 2026)

Note. Cells list only evidence reported in the included sources.

4.4 Theme 3: Trust-based pathways to engagement and preservation awareness

Trust recurs as the main mediating mechanism. In Bui et al. (2024), perceived authenticity influenced trust, which in turn influenced patronage intentions. Lu et al. (2026) report that personalized and anthropomorphic features of GenAI foster trust and attachment, which reduce perceived information cocoons and promote destination-related behavioral intentions; tourists' self-efficacy in managing misinformation strengthens the negative relationship between attachment and the evaluation of information cocoons. Outcomes related to heritage care are much less studied. Only Han et al. (2026) addressed preservation awareness, reporting converging evidence that their system may support it, in a small field study. No study in the set measured actual protective behavior or long-term stewardship.

4.5 Theme 4: Curatorial, disclosure and governance conditions

Several sources point to conditions on the supply side. Curation and human expertise are required to keep LLM guides reliable (Trichopoulos et al., 2023). Transparent AI marking, involvement of heritage stakeholders and digital literacy are recommended to sustain trust (Chuyao & Adzharuddin, 2025), and an authenticity-labelling framework has been proposed for tourism imagery (Popa (Anghel), 2026). He et al. (2025) recommend

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objective references, collaboration with heritage staff and curated datasets, and Kist and Moshfeghi (2026) call for designs that sustain rather than compromise authentic museum experience. These points correspond to the organizational and environmental parts of TOE, but they are mostly recommendations rather than tested effects.

5. Integrated Framework and Propositions

Figure 1 integrates the visitor-level SOR chain with TOE conditions and moderators. The six propositions in Table 4 are theoretical inferences from the synthesis. They are offered for testing, and Table 4 states the current evidence status of each.

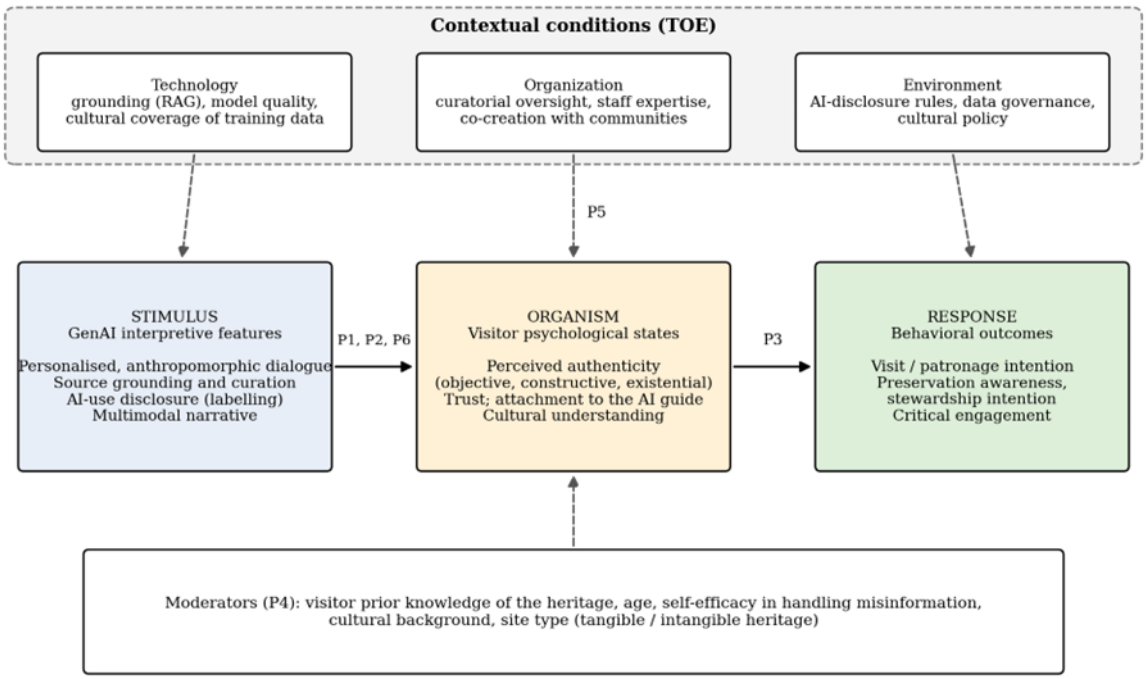


Figure 1. Integrated SOR–TOE framework of GenAI in cultural heritage tourism.

Table 4. Propositions and current evidence status

No.	Proposition	Evidence status
P1	Disclosure of AI use moderates the effect of AI-generated content on perceived authenticity.	Mixed: Bui et al. (2024); Popa (Anghel) (2026); both use destination imagery
P2	Personalized and anthropomorphic GenAI dialogue increases visitors' trust in and attachment to the AI guide.	Supported in cultural tourism: Lu et al. (2026)
P3	Trust and perceived authenticity increase behavioral intentions (visit, patronage, recommendation).	Supported: Bui et al. (2024); Lu et al. (2026)
P4	Visitors' prior knowledge of the heritage moderates	Indicative: He et al. (2025),

DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24272841*

	their ability to detect inaccuracies and bias, leaving less knowledgeable visitors more exposed.	small sample
P5	Curatorial oversight and source grounding increase perceived objective authenticity and support preservation awareness.	Indicative: Trichopoulos et al. (2023); Han et al. (2026); untested directly
P6	Heavy technological mediation reduces direct engagement with collections and, beyond a point, perceived existential authenticity.	Indicative: Kist & Moshfeghi (2026), attitudes only

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical implications

First, the evidence supports treating authenticity as multidimensional rather than as a single construct when studying GenAI, because the technology appears to strengthen some dimensions (such as personal meaning-making) while threatening others (such as factual reliability and representation). Second, trust emerges as the most consistently reported mediator between GenAI features and behavioral intentions, which suggests that models built only on technology acceptance may miss the heritage-specific question of whether visitors believe what they are told. Third, placing TOE conditions around the SOR chain frames curation and disclosure not as add-ons but as boundary conditions of the effects visitors experience.

6.2 Practical implications

Ground and curate. Anchor generated interpretation in vetted collections and keep curators responsible for review (Trichopoulos et al., 2023).

Disclose. Mark AI-generated content clearly, since disclosure is central to trust and its effect on authenticity judgments is still unsettled (Bui et al., 2024; Chuyao & Adzharuddin, 2025).

Involve custodians and communities. Heritage stakeholders can help correct bias and supply cultural detail that models lack (He et al., 2025; Chuyao & Adzharuddin, 2025).

Support visitors with less background knowledge. Provide objective references and clear indications of uncertainty, because these visitors are least able to detect errors (He et al., 2025).

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Protect the physical encounter. Design GenAI to direct attention toward collections rather than away from them (Kist & Moshfeghi, 2026).

6.3 Research agenda

Table 5. Gaps and suggested research directions

Domain	Gap observed in this review	Example research question	Suggested design
Outcomes	Preservation and stewardship outcomes are rarely measured and never as observed behavior	Does GenAI interpretation change on-site protective behavior or donations over time?	Field experiments with behavioral measures; follow-up surveys
Authenticity	Conflicting findings on AI versus human content	When does disclosure raise or lower perceived authenticity of heritage interpretation?	Pre-registered experiments varying labelling, content type and audience
Context	Few heritage sites, none in MENA; small samples	How do visitors judge GenAI interpretation at Egyptian and other MENA heritage sites?	Multi-site field studies; cross-cultural comparison
Equity and bias	Western-style output and weak detection by less-informed visitors	Can community-curated data and references reduce representational bias?	Co-design studies; model audits with custodians
Governance	Recommendations without tested effects	Which curatorial and disclosure arrangements sustain trust?	Multi-case institutional studies; Delphi
Evidence synthesis	Evidence base is still small and heterogeneous	What do effect sizes look like across studies?	A PRISMA-compliant systematic review and, later, meta-analysis

6.4 Limitations

The review has important limitations. It is a narrative review based on a purposive, engine-based search; it is not exhaustive, record counts were not kept, and relevant studies may be missing, particularly those in other languages or behind paywalls. Selection and extraction were performed by a single reviewer with AI assistance, without dual screening. For several sources, only abstracts and bibliographic records were accessible, so findings are

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reported at that level of detail and may omit nuances present in the full texts. Only English-language sources from 2023–2026 were considered. The evidence base is small and heterogeneous in designs, samples and measures, which precluded quantitative synthesis, and two sources concern destination imagery rather than heritage sites. The propositions are theoretical and have not been tested. A formal systematic review using multiple databases, duplicate screening and structured quality appraisal would be a natural next step.

7. Conclusion

GenAI offers heritage institutions new ways to interpret collections and engage visitors, but the available evidence shows that its value depends on trust, on how authenticity is judged, and on curatorial and disclosure arrangements. Evidence is mixed on whether AI content is seen as more or less authentic than human content, and it is thin on heritage stewardship and on contexts outside East Asia, Europe and Southeast Asia. Future work should test the proposed SOR–TOE propositions in field settings, measure preservation-related behavior, and extend the evidence base to underrepresented regions.

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