

# Cultural tourism: An analysis of engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experience and destination loyalty<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Cultural tourism  
Memorable tourism experience  
Destination loyalty  
Engagement  
Cultural contact

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the interplay of visitor engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experience (MTE), and destination loyalty in cultural tourism. The research was conducted with 320 individuals who have visited cultural tourist destinations within the past five years. Results, employing structural equations modeling, showed that visitor engagement positively influenced cultural contact and cultural contact positively influenced MTE. In addition, MTE had significant positive effects on loyalty. Furthermore, cultural contact was found to fully mediate the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE. Findings underscore the importance of cross-cultural interactions in creating MTEs in cultural tourism. Avenues used to engage tourists must address the cultural tourists' need for deeper cultural experience in order to successfully create MTEs.

## 1. Introduction

Tourists, who have participated in cultural activities on their most recent trip or within the past three years, represent almost 54% of the US adult population (Mandala Research, 2013). As much as 76% of all U.S. leisure travelers engage in cultural activities, representing a market size of 129.6 million adults in the U.S. who spend approximately \$171 billion annually (Mandala Research, 2013).

Scholarly research in cultural tourism has been aplenty. Among others, topics can be site-specific such as museums (e.g. Stylianou-Lambert, 2011), and heritage and/or historical sites (e.g. Gnoth and Zins, 2013); event-specific such as festivals (e.g. Akhondnejad, 2016), visitor specific such as visitor perceptions (e.g. Chen and Chen, 2010), segmentation (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke and Van Rekom, 1996), and motivation (e.g. Matheson, Rimmer, & Tinsley, 2014); host-specific such as residents' perceptions (e.g. Bachleitner and Zins, 1999); management-specific (e.g. Russo and Van Der Borg, 2002) more niche areas such as religion (e.g. Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015) and gastronomy (e.g. Kivela and Crofts, 2006), etc. Despite the abundant focus on cultural tourism, a few ambiguities exist in the extant literature. Firstly, the concept of cultural tourism is represented by different taxonomies (Hughes, 1996). Secondly, most of the existing studies are site-specific, which makes it hard to generalize findings. An important concept, memorable tourism experiences (MTE), which received overarching attention in recent years has not been studied, to our knowledge, with

the backdrop of cultural tourism as yet. Although general antecedents to memorable tourism experiences have been studied before (e.g. Kim, 2010; Kim, 2014), its potential influencers in the context of cultural tourism such as cultural contact and visitor engagement have not been looked into extensively.

In order to better manage a cultural tourism site, it is important to understand the cultural tourist. The primary focus of many such sites is often retaining existing tourists due to the lower costs associated with this strategy (Chen and Chen, 2010). Moreover, those tourists are more likely to recommend their friends, relatives and other potential tourists to a cultural tourist destination by disseminating positive word-of-mouth (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). In order to attract repeat visitors, it is important destinations go above and beyond to ensure that tourists are highly satisfied with their experience (Prayag and Ryan, 2012). However, satisfaction alone might not be enough to make a tourist revisit a destination. Memory and remembered experiences need to be studied to further understand tourists' behavioral intentions (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010). This underscores the importance of memorable tourism experiences and their effect on tourist retention. Additionally, depth of experience and visitor engagement are integral to the cultural tourist (McKercher, 2002). In this regard, we must study cultural contact and visitor engagement's influence on memorable tourism experience and visitor engagement's influence on cultural contact.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the interplay of MTE,

<sup>☆</sup> This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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visitor engagement, cultural contact, revisit intentions, and intention to recommend in a cultural tourism context. In particular, we focus on developing a model that examines the influence of visitor engagement on cultural contact, cultural contact on MTE, and the corresponding influence of MTE on destination loyalty which is represented by revisit intention and intention to recommend. In addition, the study tests the mediating effect of cultural contact on the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE.

The current study will fill the gap in literature by investigating the influence of visitor engagement and cultural contact on cultural tourists' MTE. Findings of this study can provide cultural tourist destinations implications of how to increase cultural tourists' MTE and destination loyalty through engagement and cultural contact. All of these can be expected to contribute to the competitive advantage of the cultural destination.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Cultural tourism

Since the early 1980s cultural tourism has been recognized separately from recreational tourism. However, there has not been a single universally accepted definition of “cultural tourism” (Dolnicar, 2002; Hughes, 2002). Reisinger (1994) defined cultural tourism as a form of special interest and experiential tourism based on the search for or participation in new and deep cultural experiences of an aesthetic, intellectual, emotional or psychological nature. Previous researcher suggested a broad definition of cultural tourism: “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in the historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region or institution” (Silberberg, 1995, p.362). Thus, cultural destinations can include sites as diverse as museums, festivals, architecture, heritage, and tourist attractions related to food, language, and religion (Stylianou-Lambert, 2011). Richards (1996) suggested two different definitions of cultural tourism. His conceptual definition refers to “the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs” (Richards, 1996, p. 24) while the technical definition states “all movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence” (Richards, 1996, p. 24).

Definitional ambiguities exist with scholars contending that distinctions should be made in regard to the motivations of tourists visiting a cultural destination whether the motivation is primary, secondary, or incidental (Hughes and Benn, 1995). Others contend that cultural tourism should be treated as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996). Others expressed concerns over its coverage (Hughes, 1996). The purpose of this study is *not* to investigate the definitional shortcomings prevalent in the extant literature. In this regard, we would like to follow the typology mostly used (Hughes, 1996), whereby the concept is seen more as an activity and visitation by the tourist to cultural destinations (e.g., Silberberg, 1995; Richards, 1996; Reisinger, 1994) and the emphasis is on the overall *experience* the tourist receives from the visit.

### 2.2. Memorable tourism experiences

It is difficult to define the *tourism experience* because of its multifaceted nature. Clawson and Knetsch (1966) demonstrated that the tourism experience should include the influences and personal outcomes both before the trip and after the trip. Pine and Gilmore (1998) stressed the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual impressions that are felt by individuals during the trip. Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) indicated that a tourism experience is generated through the act of visiting a destination away from the tourist's home, learning about its attributes, and enjoying its activities. Tung and Ritchie (2011) defined

tourism experience as “an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)” (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1369).

The components of tourism experience are complicated and vary widely in research. Gomez-Jacinto, Martin-Garcia, and Bertiche-Haud'Huyze (1999) demonstrated that tourist experience includes intercultural interaction, tourist activities, service quality, and holiday satisfaction. Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) indicated that tourism experiences have four realms, which are education, aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment. On the other hand, some studies pointed out emotional (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), social (Morgan & Xu, 2009), cognitive (Gopalan and Narayan, 2010), and sensescape (Dann and Jacobsen, 2003) as the common dimensions of a tourism experience.

A memorable tourism experience (MTE) is defined as “a tourism experience remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim et al., 2010, p.2). The significance of the theory of MTE originates from the influential power of past memory on consumer decision-making (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). In fact, past memory is considered to be the most valuable source of information when a tourist makes a decision to revisit a particular destination (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). There are three major reasons for the importance of past experiences stored in memory (Hoch and Deighton, 1989): the motivation to purchase is high when the information is drawn from consumers' past experiences; consumers tend to perceive past experiences as valuable and reliable information sources; past experience has great influencing power on future behavioral intentions. Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) were the first researchers to develop a quantitative scale to measure MTEs. They developed a 24 item scale consisting of seven domains: hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. The scale was later validated cross-culturally using Taiwanese tourists by Kim & Ritchie (2014).

Each individual has various tourism experiences due to different backgrounds, values, attitudes and beliefs brought to the environment (Knutson, Bonnie, Jeffrey, Kim, & Cha, 2007). Through in depth qualitative interviews administered to 208 participants, Tung & Ritchie (2011) identified four dimensions of tourism experience using grounded theory approach: affect, expectations, consequentiality, and recollection. Tsauro, Lin, and Lin (2006) indicated that the expectations of memorable experience motivate tourists to be involved in the tourism activities. Thus, it is important for cultural destinations to provide tourists with memorable experiences.

Falk and Dierking (1990) investigated the memories of museum professionals in their young adulthood and found the social dimension of their experience as the most memorable aspect of their trip. Kim et al. (2010) suggested that tourist destinations should pay attention to tourists' MTEs. MTEs are constructed by tourists on their individual assessment of subjective experiences (Kim, 2010). Therefore, the role of destination management organizations (DMOs) is to “facilitate the development of the destination that enhances the likelihood that tourists can create their own MTEs” (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1369). Cultural destinations are no exceptions. Therefore, it is important for cultural destinations to understand how they can create a positive memorable experience for the tourist.

### 2.3. Visitor engagement

The concept of engagement includes aspects of attachment, emotional connection, commitment, and devotion (Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014). While involvement refers to the interest of the consumer in a product or service, engagement represents a deeper level of commitment and interest (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2011). The level of engagement can be affected by prior knowledge, cultural capital, recreational motivation (Taheri et al., 2014), and consumption frequency (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). While engagement

and its antecedents have been well researched in the literature of marketing, the tourism literature has not explored the concept extensively (Falk et al., 2012). Visitor engagement commonly refers to visitors' involvement with and commitment to a tourism experience (Brodie, Linda, Biljana, & Ana, 2011). Taheri et al. (2014) developed and validated an eight item measure of visitor engagement using tourists visiting a museum in Glasgow, UK.

Studies in the past mostly used observations and experiments to understand visitors' engagement (Falk and Storcksdieck, 2005; Serrell and Adams, 1998). Podgorny (2004) indicated that both the length of time spent on a specific trip and the age and group composition of the tourists had significant effects on their engagement. The largest factor causing visitors to display deep engagement was a high level of *interactivity* and *collaboration*. Most visitor engagement studies focused on the length of time visitors spend in the destinations rather than on their commitment to the tourism experience. Thus, those studies fail to fully analyze the level of visitor engagement (Taheri et al., 2014).

Brodie et al. (2011) demonstrated that not all customers have the same level of engagement. Those who are engaged more derive more benefits from their experience. The level of engagement may vary between new and repeat consumers since they have different levels of familiarity with a specific service/product offering (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). According to Prentice (2001) perceived authenticity of the touristic experience is facilitated by engagement with the culture visited in a cultural tourism setting. Cultural tourists, especially the more serious ones, are active, interested, and questioning, and are reflexive of what they see and experience (Crang, 1996; Moscardo, 1996; Prentice, 2001). Thus, it is not unusual for the more engaged cultural tourists to seek a higher level of interaction or contact with the culture they are visiting.

#### 2.4. Cultural contact

Contact, or cultural contact, stands as a general term used by archaeologists to refer to groups of people coming into or staying in contact with a different culture for days, years, decades, centuries, or even millennia. In its broadest usage, this contact can range from amicable to hostile, extensive to minor, long to short term, or ancient to recent, and can include a variety of elements such as exchange, integration, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and diaspora (Silliman, 2005). There are several definitions of cultural contact prevalent in the extant literature. According to Cusick (1998), cultural contact is “a predisposition for groups to interact with *outsiders* - a necessity created human settlement through diversity, pattern, and desire for exchange - and to want to control that interaction” (Cusick, 1998, p. 4). Schortman and Urban (1998) defined cultural contact as “any case of protracted, direct interchanges among members of social units who do not share the same identity” (Schortman and Urban, 1998, p. 102). According to Gosden (2004) an isolated culture does not exist. As all cultural forms are essentially in contact with others, cultural contact is, therefore, a basic human element (Gosden, 2004).

Early studies and research on cultural contact focused, for the most part, on the relationship between the native people and colonists with monolithic cultures from several western European nations (primarily Spain, England, France, and the Netherlands) (Lightfoot, 1995), which were predominantly in the archaeology literature. In the tourism literature, cultural contact is seen as a newly emerging concept that measures the *purpose and depth of experience* tourists seek when traveling for experiencing a different culture (Gnoth and Zins, 2013; Mc Kercher, 2002). In actuality, it still has something in common with the original definition of cultural contact in archaeology, which referred to groups of tourists coming into or staying in contact for days in a particular cultural tourist destination. A tourism-centric measure of cultural contact was developed only recently. Gnoth and Zins (2013) included 250 tourists from 20 nationalities and focused on visitors' interests to engage with Maori culture in New Zealand and successfully developed

the cultural contact measurement scale. Steiner and Reisinger (2004) explained the “what” and “how” of culture. The “what” of culture is about cultural manifestations and people's ways of using the natural and economic resources while the “how” of culture concerns with habits, behavior, rites, and customs (Steiner and Reisinger, 2004). Cultural contact deals with both the “what” and the “how” of culture since it concerns both tourists' way of using the cultural tourism resources and their specific behaviors related to the cultural tourism site.

#### 2.5. Theoretical background

As people travel more, they tend to travel to know a particular place in a meaningful way rather than traveling aimlessly (Lord, 1999). Research shows that compared to average tourists, cultural tourists tend to spend more money and travel for a longer time period (Silberberg, 1995). Thus, it is crucial to learn the motivation of cultural tourists. Richards (2001) demonstrated that the increasing pace of life helps create need for free time and preservation of the past. It is often asserted that building self-identity through cultural tourism is one of the primary motivations for cultural tourists (Quan and Wang, 2004). According to Bachleitner and Zins (1999), cultural tourism opens up individualizing tendencies to the traveler, who then reverses the accelerating experiences in leisure time and seeks a contemplative journey of adventure into the past. In doing so the tourist's own identity is newly designed and culture as an individual experience, encourages the feeling of uniqueness.

The self-determination theory (SDT) is one of the theories that explains traveler's motivation and can be applied to cultural tourism. According to Deci and Ryan (2002), the SDT is an organismic-dialectic framework of motivation that considers people to be actively seeking new experiences to master and integrate. SDT demonstrates that people are motivated by different types of factors, which result in various consequences (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Based on SDT, Deci and Ryan (1985) identified four types of motivation, which are intrinsic regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, and external regulation. Intrinsic regulation is defined as customers' engagement in an activity for the feeling of pleasure and interest that derive directly from participating in the activity. Identified regulation refers to a relatively autonomous regulatory style characterized by the acceptance of a regulation as being useful for achieving the subject's goal. Introjected regulation, a form of extrinsic motivation, refers to participating in an activity not because one wants to but because one feels he should. External regulation refers to actions controlled by contingencies such as rewards and punishment that are external to the individuals.

The four types of motivation are applicable to cultural tourism. For example, tourists who engage in cultural tourism for the feeling of pleasure and interests are driven by the motivation of intrinsic regulation. Tourists with the introjected regulation motivation feel that they should involve in cultural tourism not because they want to. Cultural tourists with identified regulation may consider engaging in cultural tourism for their personal goals while tourists with external regulation may be motivated by the rewards of engaging in cultural tourism activities. Different types of motivation for involving in cultural tourism lead to different consequences such as varying levels of cultural contact and visitor engagement. For instance, tourists with the intrinsic regulation motivation might be more willing to thoroughly learn about a new culture while traveling compared to tourists with an external regulation motivation, indicating that the former type of motivation might generate a need for a higher level of cultural contact in the context of cultural tourism. Meanwhile, since engagement can also be influenced by motivation (Brodie et al., 2013) and that studies in education showed that more autonomous extrinsic motivation was associated with more engagement (Connell and Wellborn, 1991), tourists with the intrinsic regulation type of motivation might have higher level of visitor engagement in cultural tourism when compared to the other three types of motivation. Thus, these different types of motivations are

likely to contribute to different levels of MTEs in a cultural tourist destination.

One of the most important outcomes of MTEs, loyalty, can be assessed by both attitudinal and behavioral measures (Chen and Chen, 2010). The attitudinal measure is known as a specific desire to continue a relationship with a product/ service provider while the behavioral measure refers to repeat visit (Chen and Chen, 2010). Oliver (1999) divides customer loyalty into four stages, which are cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty, conative loyalty, and action loyalty. On the other hand, tourists' destination loyalty is frequently measured by tourists' intentions to revisit and their intention to recommend (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008). Several studies showed that past travel experience could influence tourists' revisit intention to a tourist destination (e.g., Gomez-Jacinto et al., 1999; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). Tourists with higher intentions to revisit are more likely to recommend friends, relatives or other potential tourists to a cultural tourist destination via positive word-of-mouth (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999).

Ntoumanis (2005) indicated that SDT can predict positive motivational outcomes such as customer loyalty. The degree to which service providers support customers' needs would influence customers' satisfaction, predicting self-determined motivation including intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external regulations. Thus, self-determined motivation would positively influence customers' future intention and behavior to participate in cultural tourism (Ntoumanis, 2005).

According to SDT, different types of motivation to involve in cultural tourism would lead to different levels of visitor engagement and cultural contact in cultural tourism. Given higher level of involvement and understanding of the culture of a destination generate higher level of MTEs, the higher level of visitor engagement and cultural contact are expected to be associated with higher level of MTEs. Since Gomez-Jacinto et al. (1999) indicated that travel experience could influence tourists' revisit intention and intention to recommend, MTEs of cultural tourists are supposed to be associated with cultural tourists' revisit intention and intention to recommend.

## 2.6. Hypotheses development

In hindsight, cultural contact emphasizes tourists' own willingness to engage in a local culture rather than culture as a self-directed entertainment (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999), which describes the extent of tourists' desire for an authentic experience (Wang, 2000). Given cultural tourists possess the motivation and interest in experiencing and learning various cultures (Boyd, 2002), higher level of visitor engagement in cultural tourism is expected to be associated with deeper understanding of destination's culture. In other words, we anticipate a positive relationship between visitor engagement and cultural contact (Fig. 1).

**Hypothesis 1.** Visitor engagement positively and significantly influences tourists' cultural contact.

Tung and Ritchie (2011) asserted that deep understanding and active involvement in local culture, local people's way of life, and the local language help to create an authentic and memorable experience. However, they did not attempt to verify their assertion empirically.

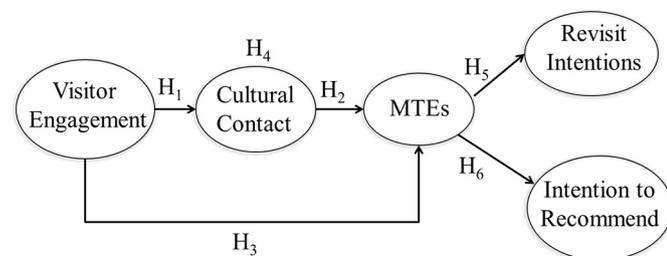


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

Through qualitative interviews of Australian travelers, Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) suggested that travelers remembered experiencing authentic local cultures, local festivals and rituals, and local culinary experiences. Since cultural contact reflects the tourist's experience and interaction with local culture, higher level of cultural contact is expected to create a higher level of MTE in the context of cultural tourism. This relationship might not work for all forms of tourism because the tourist might not be seeking cultural contact in some forms of tourism. However, for cultural tourism, we expect a strong association.

**Hypothesis 2.** Cultural contact positively and significantly influences MTE.

A positive relationship is suggested between customer engagement and satisfying experiences in service settings (Brodie et al., 2011). In tourism perspective, Taheri et al. (2014) argued that better engagement with a tourist attraction's context and contents would optimize the overall tourism experience. Thus, it is anticipated that higher level of visitor engagement would create a higher level of MTE. Especially for cultural tourists since they are mostly looking to immerse themselves in the cultural experience, more engagement would likely create a more memorable cultural tourism experience.

**Hypothesis 3.** Visitor engagement positively and significantly influences MTEs.

Insofar we established that visitor engagement would positively affect MTE and cultural contact and cultural contact in turn would positively affect MTE. However, in a cultural tourism experience, increased engagement signals to increased cultural contact as immersion in the culture is one of the main essences of a memorable cultural tourism experience. More specifically, the increased engagement must address the tourists' increased cultural contact in order to create memorable tourism experiences in case of cultural tourism. Based on this logic, it can be argued that cultural contact would fully mediate the relationship between visitor engagement and memorable tourism experience in a cultural tourism context.

**Hypothesis 4.** Cultural contact fully mediates the relationship between visitor engagement and MTEs.

Past studies indicated that travel experience positively influences visitors' revisit intention (Gomez-Jacinto et al., 1999). Revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth are shown as positive outcomes of MTEs (Woodside, Caldwell, and Albers-Miller, 2004). The number of previous visits can also significantly influence tourists' future behavioral intentions (Mazursky, 1989). Lam and Hsu (2004) found that Mainland Chinese tourists' intention to revisit Hong Kong became stronger with more visits. Moreover, Kim and Ritchie (2014), using a sample of Taiwanese tourists, demonstrated that MTEs positively influenced revisit intentions. Furthermore, Kim (2017) using a sample of international tourists from key markets in Taiwan showed that MTE is a stronger predictor of revisit intention and word of mouth. Thus, it is expected that MTE would have a positive effect on tourists' revisit intention and intention to recommend in cultural tourism settings:

**Hypothesis 5.** MTEs positively and significantly influences tourists' revisit intentions.

**Hypothesis 6.** MTEs positively and significantly influences tourists' intentions to recommend.

## 3. Methodology

A self-report survey was prepared using Qualtrics. We targeted American tourists, above the age of eighteen, who have visited one or more cultural tourist attractions in the last five years. First, the survey was sent to a group of ten graduate students who analyzed its face validity. The survey was put to use via Amazon Mechanical Turk

(MTurk), a crowd-sourcing platform where tasks are allocated to a population of unidentified workers for completion in exchange for compensation. According to [Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling \(2011\)](#) the data acquired via MTurk is at least as reliable as those gathered via conventional techniques and the participants are more demographically varied than are usual internet samples. At the beginning of the survey, we defined cultural tourism so that there is no confusion among survey takers regarding its meaning. We asked the participants to think about their most recent cultural tourism experience when filling out the survey. As a result, 320 usable responses were collected. The self-reported most recent cultural destinations spanned a total of 149 cities in 43 different countries. Reliability analysis, descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, and structural equations modeling were undertaken via SPSS version 18 and Amos 22.

The survey instrument included questions about cultural contact, visitor engagement, MTEs, revisit intention, intention to recommend, and demographics such as gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, and trip dynamics such as location of travel and traveling group. MTEs, visitor engagement, cultural contact, revisit intention, and intention to recommend are all measured using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

All the scales we used came from existing literature and have been validated extensively in prior research. Visitor engagement scale was adopted from [Taheri et al. \(2014\)](#) that is used to measure visitors' level of engagement with tourist attractions. The scale includes 8 items such as "Using guided tour" and "Using social interaction space". Cultural contact was measured by a scale consisting of 11 items, which is borrowed from [Gnoth and Zins \(2013\)](#). The original cultural contact scale was developed to differentiate among tourists' interest levels when exposed to the native Maori culture in Australia. These statements were modified in order to be used in the context of general cultural tourism. The items include "I like to learn about different customs, rituals and ways of life" "I would like to get to know more about this culture". MTEs was adopted from [Kim et al. \(2012\)](#). The 24-item scale is consisted of seven dimensions, which are hedonism, novelty, involvement, knowledge, local culture, refreshment, and meaningfulness. Examples of the items are, "I really enjoyed this tourism experience" and "It was different from previous experiences". Tourists' revisit intention scale and the intention to recommend scale were adapted from [Bonn, Joseph-Mathews, Dai, Hayes, and Cave \(2007\)](#). Each of the scale is consisted of three items. The revisit intention includes "I intend to revisit this place in the future", "If given the opportunity, I am willing to return to this place", and "I plan to visit this place again in the future". The intention to recommend scale includes "I am willing to recommend this place to my friends", "I would say positive things about this place", and "I would encourage friends and relatives to visit this place". For a complete list of items and their corresponding sources, please refer to [Table 2](#).

We used a random parceling strategy for visitor engagement items and cultural contact items. Survey items on a common scale can be parceled using a random procedure, which is to assign each item, randomly and without replacement, to one of the parcel groupings ([Little et al., 2002](#)). Visitor engagement items were parceled into two factors (4 items each) and cultural contact items were parceled into three (two factors containing 4 items and 1 containing 3 items). Models based on parceled data are more parsimonious, have fewer chances for residuals to be correlated or dual loadings to emerge, and lead to reductions in various sources of sampling error compared with item-level data ([MacCallum et al., 1999](#)).

#### 4. Results

Demographic information of the respondents is presented in [Table 1](#). Location of travel of the respondents is displayed on a map generated by TripAdvisor in [Fig. 2](#).

As seen in [Table 1](#), our sample is not representative of the general U.S. demographics. A high number of Asian Americans (30.3%) and a

**Table 1**  
Demographic profile of respondents.

	N	%
Gender (N = 320)		
Male	169	52.80
Female	151	47.20
Age (N = 320)		
19–25	98	30.60
26–35	136	42.50
36–45	48	15.00
46–55	28	8.80
≥ 56	10	3.10
Ethnicity (N = 320)		
Hispanic	14	4.40
White	139	43.40
Black or African American	18	5.60
Asian American	97	30.30
Native Indian or Alaskan native	38	11.90
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	14	4.40
Education (N = 320)		
High school or equivalent	10	3.10
Some college	51	15.90
Associate's degree	22	6.90
Bachelor's degree	142	44.40
Graduate degree	68	21.30
Professional degree	27	8.40
Income (N = 320)		
< \$20,000	93	29.10
\$20,000 to \$39,999	75	23.40
\$40,000 to \$59,999	80	25.00
\$60,000 to \$79,999	33	10.30
\$80,000 to \$99,999	18	5.60
≥ \$100,000	21	6.60
Visiting group (N = 320)		
Alone	26	8.10
With children	13	4.10
With friends	109	34.10
With family	139	43.40
With an organized tour	33	10.30

high number of American Indian and Alaskan Native (11.9%) exemplify this point. The general U.S. population comprised of 5.6% Asian Americans and 1.2% American Indians and Alaskan Natives ([Census, 2016](#)). This anomaly in ethnicity breakdowns was due to two main reasons. First, Mturk, the platform we utilized to collect data, is hugely popular among Asian Americans. Second, there is a high preponderance of cultural tourists among the Asian American and Native American and Alaskan Native population. This is highlighted by the large number of destinations in South Asia as seen in [Fig. 2](#).

#### 4.1. Items, measures, descriptive statistics, and reliability

[Table 2](#) presents the measures, list of items and their corresponding means and standard deviation, and the skewness and kurtosis of the variables. We estimated our sample size based on the ratio of sample size to free parameters which according to [Bentler and Chou \(1987\)](#) should be between 5:1 and 10:1. With 49 free parameters to be estimated, a sample between 245 and 490 should be adequate. To have a power of 0.99 to retain the null hypothesis for the test of close fit, a sample size of no less than 296 is considered as sufficient ([Cohen, 1988; Westland, 2010](#)). As a result, a total of 342 responses were received, of which 22 were discarded for having missing data. Data was checked for normality, skewness, kurtosis, and for outliers. Skewness and kurtosis indicated univariate normality and a mesokurtic distribution ([Table 2](#)). It can be debated that our skewness values for the two dependent variables are a little high. However, it is quite usual for studies in social sciences to employ structural equations modeling with similar data sets (e.g. [Barnes et al., 2001; Bentler and Chou, 1987; Rocha and Fink, 2017](#)). Moreover, the maximum-likelihood estimator is considered relatively robust for small violations of non-normality ([Bollen, 1989](#)).



Fig. 2. Travel map of respondents.

Reinartz, Haenlein, and Henseler (2009) ran several Monte-Carlo experiments that found no significant differences in SEM results utilizing ML estimator on samples of different sizes and with different Kurtosis and skewness levels.

Next, the reliability of the constructs was assessed. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of the constructs in the proposed model. The alpha values ranged from 0.80 to 0.96 (see Table 2), exceeding the minimum of 0.70 (Hair et al., 1995).

#### 4.2. Measurement model

The adequacy of the measurement model was examined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The standardized maximum likelihood loadings and fit statistics that resulted are provided in Table 3. The  $\chi^2$  value of the measurement model is significant ( $\chi^2$  (125) = 391.01,  $p < 0.01$ ), which means the theoretical model and the empirical data did not fit each other well (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). However, given the likely effect of large sample size on the chi-square values, depending on  $\chi^2$  alone can be erroneous and other model fit indices can be selected to assess the fit of the model. Other indices of the model's fit included a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.94, which range from zero to 1.00 with a value above 0.90 indicating good fit (Byrne, 1998), and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.08, which should not exceed 0.1 and ideally lie between 0.05 and 0.08 (Turner and Reisinger, 2001). To sum up, given the sample size and the number of measured items, the measurement model is adequate.

#### 4.3. Validity and reliability

The composite reliability (CR) of the construct is used to measure the latent variable's internal consistency. The higher the CR value, the more precisely the measures can predict construct reliability. Scholars suggest that the CR value should be  $> 0.60$  (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 4 shows that the CR values of all constructs are between 0.73 and 0.93, demonstrating good internal consistency.

Convergent validity was tested using factor loadings and t-values of each construct to see whether the measured items toward the construct have completely standardized estimates between 0.50 and 0.95 and whether it is statistically significant (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Table 3 shows that the majority of factor loadings are  $> 0.70$  and all factor

loadings were greater than the 0.5 cutoff. In addition, all indicator loadings for the constructs in the model were significant at 0.05. Moreover, an adequate convergent validity should contain  $< 50\%$  average variances extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In other words, the AVE value should be 0.50 or above. As shown in Table 4, the AVE value for each construct is 0.58, 0.71, 0.66, 0.692 and 0.77. Thus, the model has achieved the convergent validity.

We also assessed discriminant validity. Adequate discriminant validity means that the indicators for different constructs should not be so highly correlated as to lead one to conclude that they are measuring the same thing (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested that discriminant validity is based on a comparison of squared pair-wise correlations between constructs and the AVE value for each construct. Each construct's AVE value (between 0.58 and 0.77) should be greater than the square of their correlations with the other constructs (as shown in Table 4). Thus, discriminant validity is achieved showing that each construct is statistically different from the other.

#### 4.4. Hypothesis testing

A structural model with five constructs was estimated using Maximum Likelihood (ML) through SPSS Amos 22. Table 5 displays the standardized, theoretical paths linking visitor engagement, cultural contact, MTEs, revisit intentions and intention to recommend. The path between visitor engagement and cultural contact (0.39,  $p < 0.05$ ) shows that visitor engagement in cultural tourism positively and significantly influences tourists' cultural contact. The analysis further suggests significant direct effects of cultural contact on MTEs (0.59,  $p < 0.05$ ), the higher the level of tourists' cultural contact in cultural tourism, the higher are the MTEs. Moreover, the positive and significant effects of MTEs on both revisit intentions and intention to recommend as hypothesized by H5 and H6 are supported (H5: MTEs-revisit intentions = 1.38,  $p < 0.05$ ; H6: MTEs-intention to recommend = 0.58,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the higher the level of MTEs, the higher is the intention to revisit and to recommend the destination to others.

Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach was employed to test the mediating effect of cultural contact in the relationship between visitor engagement and MTEs, followed by bootstrapping as suggested by Hayes (2009). The direct path from visitor engagement to MTEs is assessed without the intervention of cultural contact and with the intervention of cultural contact as a mediator. The direct path standardized beta was 0.27 ( $p < 0.05$ ), which suggested that H3 is supported. When

**Table 2**  
Measures, list of Items, descriptive statistics and reliability.

Measure	Item	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Memorable Tourism Experiences (Kim, Ritchie and McCormick 2010)	I was thrilled about having a new experience	5.93	1.12	- 0.64	- 0.05	0.96
	I indulged in the activities	5.85	1.18			
	I really enjoyed this tourism experience	6.03	1.08			
	It was exciting	6.00	1.10			
	It was once-in-a lifetime experience	5.44	1.47			
	It was unique	5.78	1.20			
	It was different from previous experiences	5.73	1.17			
	I experienced something new	5.87	1.17			
	I had good impressions about the local people	5.64	1.26			
	I closely experienced the local culture	5.67	1.22			
	Local people in a destination were friendly	5.69	1.25			
	It was liberating	5.46	1.27			
	I enjoyed sense of freedom	5.60	1.23			
	It was refreshing	5.73	1.23			
	I was revitalized	5.72	1.23			
	I did something meaningful	5.56	1.30			
	I did something important	5.41	1.33			
	I learned about myself	5.40	1.34			
	I visited a place where I really wanted to go	5.83	1.20			
	I enjoyed activities, which I really wanted to do	5.78	1.15			
I was interested in the main activities of this tourism experience	5.87	1.15				
The experience was exploratory	5.88	1.16				
I learned knowledge from the experience	5.89	1.16				
I experienced new culture	5.81	1.23				
Visitor Engagement (Taheri, Jafari and O'Gorman, 2014)	Using (interactive) panels	4.29	1.91	- 0.39	- 0.18	0.80
	Using guided tour	4.59	2.00			
	Using videos and audios	4.47	1.90			
	Using social interaction space	4.87	1.75			
	Using my own guide book and literature	4.94	1.75			
	Seeking help from staff	4.95	1.65			
	Playing with materials such as toys, jigsaw puzzle and quizzes	3.87	2.02			
	Using the on-site online facilities	4.56	1.95			
Cultural Contact (Gnoth and Zins, 2013)	I like to learn about different customs, rituals and ways of life	5.80	1.08	- 0.70	0.33	0.90
	I like to experience more than just staged events associated with this culture (e.g., dances)	5.79	1.19			
	I would like to get to know more about this culture	5.80	1.16			
	I prefer just to observe how this culture is different rather than really meet and interact with people from that culture	4.80	1.72			
	I am interested in getting to know more people from this culture	5.62	1.16			
	The more I see, hear, and sense about this culture, the more I want to experience it	5.63	1.19			
	I am very keen on finding out about this culture	5.57	1.23			
	I would like to see the world through the eyes of people from this culture	5.51	1.39			
	I like to spend time on finding out about this culture	5.53	1.29			
	I would like to get involved in cultural activities	5.59	1.23			
	Contact with this culture forms a very important part of my experience in this visit	5.58	1.25			
	Intention to Recommend (Bonn et al., 2007)	I would recommend this place to my friends.	5.78			
I would say positive things about this place.		5.95	1.12			
I would encourage friends and relatives to visit this place.		5.69	1.40			
Revisit Intention (Bonn et al., 2007)	I would revisit this place in the future.	5.98	1.26	- 1.17	1.28	0.87
	If given the opportunity, I would return to this place.	6.00	1.17			
	I am loyal to this cultural destination.	6.01	1.12			

cultural contact was added, visitor engagement showed significant positive influence on cultural contact (0.41,  $p < 0.05$ ) while cultural contact also influenced MTEs positively and significantly (0.87,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, the direct effect of visitor engagement on MTEs changed into  $-0.08$  ( $p = 0.11 > 0.05$ ) after the introduction of cultural contact as a mediator. Thus, Cultural contact fully mediated the relationship between visitor engagement and MTEs.

Furthermore, bootstrapping was carried out with a sample size of 2000, which allowed for random sampling with replacement and an estimation of sampling distribution. The effect without the mediator was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). After adding the mediator, the direct path became highly insignificant with  $p$ -value of 0.67. The indirect effect of visitor engagement on MTEs via the mediator, cultural contact, was highly significant (0.18,  $p < 0.05$ ), which confirmed Hypothesis 4 (cultural contact fully mediates the effect of visitor

engagement on MTEs).

### 5. Discussion

In the context of cultural tourism, higher level of visitor engagement contributes to higher level of tourists' cultural contact. Cultural tourists generally exhibit different levels of motivation and interest in experiencing and learning about different cultures (Boyd, 2002). Meeting local people is acknowledged as a key motive for cultural tourism (Reisinger, 1994). Our findings suggest that the more they engage in cultural tourism, the more they seek a deeper understanding of the local culture of that destination. Thus, higher levels of visitor engagement in cultural tourism create higher levels of cultural contact. Cultural tourists who greatly use guided tour, guide books, panels, literature, media and materials, onsite facilities, or help from staff are likely to seek more

**Table 3**  
Confirmatory factor analysis results including standardized loading estimates.

Measure	VE	CC	MTE	RI	IR
VE1	0.66				
VE2	0.85				
CC1		0.78			
CC2		0.88			
CC3		0.86			
Hedonism			0.85		
Novelty			0.75		
Local culture			0.79		
Refreshment			0.83		
Meaningfulness			0.76		
Involvement			0.85		
Knowledge			0.84		
RI1				0.85	
RI2				0.84	
RI3				0.80	
IR1					0.86
IR2					0.89
IR3					0.88
Cronbach's Alphas	0.80	0.90	0.96	0.87	0.91

\* $\chi^2 = 391.01$ ;  $df = 125$ ; CFI: 0.94; RMSEA: 0.08.

\*VE-Visitor Engagement; CC-Cultural Contact; RI-Revisit Intentions; MTE-Memorable Tourism Experience; IR-Intention to Recommend.

**Table 4**  
Correlations among latent constructs.

Measure	VE	CC	MTE	RI	IR	AVE
VE	1					0.58
CC	0.33 (0.11)	1				0.71
MTE	0.24 (0.06)	0.77 (0.59)	1			0.66
RI	0.22 (0.05)	0.64 (0.41)	0.62 (0.38)	1		0.69
IR	0.11 (0.01)	0.67 (0.45)	0.74 (0.55)	0.74 (0.55)	1	0.77
Mean	4.57	5.57	5.73	5.81	5.99	
SD	1.21	0.90	0.88	1.14	1.09	
Composite reliability	0.73	0.88	0.93	0.87	0.91	

Note: VE = Visitor Engagement; CC = Cultural Contact; MTE = Memorable Tourism Experience; RI = Revisit Intention; IR = Intention to Recommend.

\*Correlation coefficients are estimates from SPSS.

**Table 5**  
Structural model results.

Path	Coefficients	P	Results
Visitor Engagement (VE) → Cultural Contact (CC)	0.39	**	Supported
Cultural Contact (CC) → Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE)	0.59	**	Supported
Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) → Revisit Intention (RI)	1.38	**	Supported
Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) → Intention to Recommend(IR)	0.58	*	Supported

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

interaction with and a better understanding of the local culture. This is because engaging in the cultural tourism phenomenon makes them more curious about the local culture, raising tourists' interest levels in the local culture. As a result, they seek more cultural contact. Thus, cultural destinations looking to engage tourists through various avenues must follow it up with more cultural contact in the form of more person to person interactions, cultural performances and exhibitions,

and participatory and educational activities that provide hands on experiential learning environments for the tourists.

Findings also showed that a higher level of cultural contact results in a higher memorable tourism experience for the tourists. This is because interacting with local culture and residents enable tourists to experience the local life of the tourist destination more closely, which ultimately provide them with an experience to remember. This positive relationship between cultural contact and MTEs could also be explained by the components of MTEs. Cultural tourists generally want to encounter novelty, beauty, authenticity, and uniqueness of the cultural product and gain knowledge, learn new things, and experience the diversity and atmosphere of the cultural product (Reisinger, 1994). Cultural contact may influence the novelty dimension of the MTEs, as indicated by Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) that experiencing new culture has an effect on perceived novelty (a psychological feeling of newness that result from having a new experience), which is a component of MTE. Tourists' cultural contact also has a positive effect on the local culture dimension of the MTEs. Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) demonstrated that experiencing local life, cultures, and foods will create positive MTEs. When a tourist is seeking a deep experience in regard to a new culture, the tourist will be more open to interacting with the new culture, and in the process the tourist will get to experience the culture more closely and is more likely to appreciate the culture. Moreover, there is no doubt that higher level of cultural contact is associated with higher knowledge acquired, which is another dimension of MTE. As you pursue a better understanding of the new culture, you will explore more and interact more with the culture, and accordingly, acquire new knowledge about the culture. Additionally, cultural contact influences cultural tourists' search for meaningful experiences during their trip, such as seeking a sense of emotional or spiritual fulfillment (Callanan and Thomas, 2005). As tourists seek more deep understanding of the new culture, they will be more thrilled and excited about having the new experience. In the process, they will exhibit an active interest in the activities the destination/site has to offer, partake in more activities, and enjoy their time. Thus, cultural contact positively affects the hedonism, refreshment, and involvement dimension of the memorable tourism experience.

In the absence of cultural contact, visitor engagement did show a significant positive relationship with cultural contact. With the presence of cultural contact, visitor engagement only influenced MTEs through cultural contact in cultural tourism. Thus, cultural contact fully mediated the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE in the context of cultural tourism. In other words, visitor engagement does have a direct effect on MTEs, but that effect goes through cultural contact in its presence. This underscores the importance of cultural contact in creating memorable tourism experiences in cultural tourism. Brodie et al. (2011) and Taheri et al. (2014) found that visitor engagement has a positive influence on tourism experience. The present study found that visitor engagement influences MTEs through cultural contact, which means that the use of guided tour, guide books and literature, on-site facilities targeted to provide a deep experience and a better understanding of the local culture, will improve the level of tourists' memorable tourism experience. Visitor engagement activities such as guided tours and other facilities as such must address the cultural interests of the tourists in order to make the cultural tourism experience memorable.

Among other results, it was found that MTEs positively influenced tourists' intention to revisit and recommend the cultural destination. Thus, we can say that memorable tourism experiences positively affect the destination loyalty of the tourists in cultural tourism. A positive memorable tourism experience will increase the loyalty of the tourists such that the tourists will be more likely to visit the cultural destination again in the future and recommend the cultural destination to others. This finding is in accordance with previous research. As indicated by Gomez-Jacinto et al. (1999), travel experience can positively influence visitors' revisit intention. Similarly, Woodside, Caldwell, and Albers-

Miller (2004) found that MTEs can create positive word-of-mouth. Thus, cultural destinations need to create memorable tourism experiences if they want tourists to come back again and spread positive word of mouth.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Implications

Cross-cultural exchanges between the hosts and the tourists can be mutually beneficial. Social exchange theory contends that “residents are likely to participate in an exchange with tourists if they believe that they are likely to gain benefits without incurring unacceptable costs” (Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001, p. 364). For cultural tourism to be successful it is important that residents are in support of tourism development. Cultural tourists are naturally motivated to be inquisitive about new cultures. Tourism planners need to acknowledge it and provide avenues for the cultural tourists to engage and immerse in the local culture. As our findings suggest, cultural contact significantly and positively influences memorable tourism experiences, which in turn positively affects revisit intentions and intentions to recommend. Thus, for cultural destinations/sites, the primary focus should be on how to increase and improve the interaction between tourists and hosts that result in a fruitful cultural exchange. Engaging the tourists through usual venues such as guided tours, staff interaction, media and materials, would work well if they address the tourists need for cultural contact. Thus, tourist engagement should center around the new culture and provide more knowledge about the new culture in addition to opportunities to immerse in the new culture through more interactions such as educational sessions, live entertainment, guided tours, host-tourist luncheons, dinners and meetings, etc. to name a few. Hospitality services such as local restaurants with locally sourced ingredients, boutique hotels, and bed and breakfasts can foster cultural contact and create a sense of authenticity. In fact as many as four in ten tourists are willing to pay more for a distinctive lodging that reflects a destination's culture (Hargrove, 2014). Creating and hosting authentic and immersive experiences require active community participation in order to be successful. Immersive experiences necessitate interaction between tourists and local residents—particularly artists, business managers and their employees, cultural institutions and staff. These individuals must be trained in hospitality services to ensure appropriate hosting capabilities and satisfy quality experience delivery (Hargrove, 2014).

Planners and destination management organizations should not think about commodifying cultural tourism with a mass tourism agenda. A desire for individual involvement rather than organized mass tourism is identified as a primary motive for cultural tourism (Reisinger, 1994). The focus should be more on how to promote cultural exchanges and how to provide an authentic experience to the tourists through effective host-tourist interactions. In such cases, the residents would eventually see the cultural-exchange benefits in addition to the financial and economic benefits that come alongside. The U.S. cultural traveler, in fact, spends 60% more and takes more trips than other domestic leisure travelers (Mandala Research, 2013). Thus, destinations can receive greater benefits from cultural travelers. An ideal way of capturing this market segment is to develop cultural districts consisting of local restaurants, distinctive lodging, festivals, art, music, theater, museums, heritage and history, education, and so on (Hargrove, 2014). These provide cultural tourists avenues to spend more money and time while immersing themselves in the local culture.

### 6.2. Limitations

This study utilized a self-report survey asking participants to rate their level of visitor engagement, cultural contact, MTEs and loyalty. Social desirability bias might be an issue that prevents participants from being honest with their responses. We asked participants to think about

their most recent cultural tourism experience which must be within the last five years. There might be a situation where tourists could not accurately remember their last experience. The limitations of crowd-sourcing platform Amazon MTurk such as lack of control, deceptive responses, rushed responses, etc., might have influenced the result of the study to a certain extent. However, necessary precautions such as using filter questions to catch inattentive and rushed responses and monitoring the time participants take to fill out the items were undertaken to minimize such errors. Lastly the demographical split in ethnicity of the tourists was not representative of the U.S. population. However, we only asked tourists with experience and interest in cultural tourism. As such, we do not feel the irregularity in ethnical representation does not pose a major concern in this study.

### 6.3. Conclusions

The study examined the influence of visitor engagement on cultural contact, cultural contact on MTE, and the influence of MTE on revisit intention and intention to recommend. The study also explored the mediating role of cultural contact on the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE. Overall, the results of this study show that the level of visitor engagement can increase the level of cultural contact in cultural tourism. Cultural contact positively influences tourists' MTEs and fully mediates the relationship between visitor engagement and MTEs. In addition, the MTEs have positive effects on cultural tourists' revisit intentions and intention to recommend. MTEs especially for cultural tourism can be a valuable quality indicator for destination managers. Destination managers might use the MTEs in their actual operations to understand visitors' evaluations of their service and products. The goal of cultural destinations is to create a connection with the tourist so that he or she comes back to the destination again and encourages his/her friends, relatives, and acquaintances to visit the destination. Therefore, cultural destinations may focus on how to increase and improve the effective interaction between tourists and hosts to enhance cultural exchange and provide an authentic experience to tourists. Visitor engagement could center on the new culture and provide more knowledge about the new culture through more interactive methods such as host-guest luncheons and live entertainments. By measuring visitor engagement, cultural contact, and MTEs of the tourists, the destination can always keep an eye on their performance. As such, we anticipate our study would encourage further research in this area.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.10.006>.

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