Cultural Proximity and Identity Reinforcement in Domestic Tourism: A Multidimensional Experiential Model from Cotopaxi National Park

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Article

Cultural Proximity and Identity Reinforcement in Domestic Tourism: A Multidimensional Experiential Model from Cotopaxi National Park

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Abstract

Compared with international travel, where dominant frameworks emphasize cultural distance, novelty, and difference, domestic tourism in protected natural areas remains under-theorized. This study conceptualizes domestic tourism through cultural proximity and introduces the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM), which frames the tourist experience as a multidimensional experiential system in which environmental, cultural, managerial, infrastructural, and communicative elements acquire meaning within shared symbolic contexts. A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was employed. Expert interviews informed construct development, followed by a survey of Ecuadorian domestic tourists visiting Cotopaxi National Park (n = 1,113). Confirmatory factor analysis supported a six-dimensional structure (natural, cultural, accessibility, administrative, complementary, communication), demonstrating strong reliability and convergent validity. Structural equation modelling indicated good model fit (CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.064), supporting the structural adequacy of the integrated experiential system. Natural attributes show the greatest experiential prominence, while cultural and communication dimensions occupy key structural positions in symbolic engagement and meaning construction. The findings suggest a theoretical inversion of cultural distance logic: in culturally familiar settings, familiarity, continuity, and identity resonance underpin experiential coherence. The ACPM provides a validated framework for analyzing domestic tourism in culturally rich protected areas and supports sustainable, identity-sensitive destination management.

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1. Introduction

Tourism in protected natural areas plays a structurally significant role in achieving environmental, economic and sociocultural sustainability. These spaces fulfil a dual function: they protect biodiversity while also serving as living repositories of cultural and historical identity (UNWTO, 2023). In Latin America, the convergence of exceptional biodiversity with indigenous and mestizo traditions imbues nature–culture relations with a unique character. Ecuador is a prime example of this, as seen in Cotopaxi National Park (CNP), which is dominated by the Cotopaxi volcano and surrounded by Andean communities. Here, domestic tourism intertwines environmental appreciation with symbolic recognition of national heritage (Ministerio del Ambiente Agua y Transición Ecológica, 2022).

Despite the recognized importance of protected areas in the development of sustainable tourism, research has largely focused on international mobility. Dominant explanatory models interpret

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tourist behavior in terms of cultural distance, perceived risk and the pursuit of novel experiences (Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2009) (Lee, Choi, Yoo, & Oh, 2018). While these frameworks are effective for cross-cultural encounters, their explanatory scope diminishes in domestic contexts characterized by linguistic, symbolic and social familiarity. This reveals a theoretical gap: while prevailing approaches focus on alterity and difference, domestic tourism operates primarily through recognition, continuity and shared cultural frames (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013) (Richards, 2018).

In domestic settings, visitors do not confront a radically "other" culture but experience landscapes and heritage as extensions of their own socio-cultural environment. Cultural proximity—understood as perceived similarity in values, symbols, practices, and communicative codes—becomes central to how experiences are interpreted in domestic tourism settings. Shared language facilitates symbolic decoding (Straubhaar, 1991), familiarity with social norms reduces cognitive uncertainty (Reisinger & Turner, 2003), and identification with national heritage markers strengthens emotional and symbolic attachment (Smith, 2006). In this context, the construction of meaning in tourism experiences is more associated with continuity and resonance within shared cultural frames than with novelty.

For domestic visitors, trips to protected areas such as the CNP function as experiences of cultural familiarity and symbolic recognition, thereby reinforcing their emotional ties to national landscapes and heritage. Thus, protected areas operate not only as ecological assets, but also as identity-relevant spaces, where environmental appreciation intersects with collective memory and belonging (Richards, 2018). This perspective shifts the analytical focus from tourism as the exploration of difference to tourism as the reaffirmation of shared cultural meanings.

Addressing this gap requires a theoretical reorientation. While cultural distance theory remains valuable, it must be complemented by a perspective capable of explaining tourism behavior in contexts of proximity rather than difference. This study proposes the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM), which conceptualizes the domestic tourism experience in protected areas as a multidimensional experiential structure integrating:

- Natural factors
- Cultural factors
- Administrative factors
- Accessibility factors
- Complementary factors
- Communication factors

Rather than predicting a single outcome, the ACPM explains how these interrelated dimensions form a coherent experiential structure. Cultural proximity acts as an interpretive theoretical lens through which these experiential dimensions acquire symbolic, emotional and social meaning.

This research is guided by three objectives:

1. To identify the core dimensions that structure the domestic tourism experience in Cotopaxi National Park.
2. To develop and validate measurement scales operationalizing the constructs of the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM).
3. To examine the structural configuration and interrelationships among natural, cultural, administrative, accessibility, complementary, and communication dimensions using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

The study offers three comparatively salient contributions. Conceptually, it advances cultural proximity as a complementary analytical perspective to cultural distance, emphasizing familiarity, symbolic recognition and experiential continuity as the organizing principle of domestic tourism experience. Methodologically, it provides a validated, multidimensional measurement framework applicable to protected areas in the Global South. In practice, it informs context-sensitive management strategies that integrate environmental conservation, heritage interpretation,

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accessibility, and digital communication, recognizing protected areas as socio-cultural as well as ecological systems.

Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of domestic tourism requires moving beyond scenic appreciation towards the interplay between nature, identity-relevant symbolism, and cultural continuity. This interplay is particularly evident in protected areas such as Cotopaxi National Park, where environmental and cultural significance converge within a shared national landscape.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. From Cultural Distance to Cultural Proximity

Cultural distance has traditionally been a central concept in explaining international tourism behavior. It refers to the perceived degree of difference between the tourist's culture and that of the destination, influencing perceptions of uncertainty and risk, as well as experience evaluation (Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2009) (Lee, Choi, Yoo, & Oh, 2018). Within this framework, novelty and contrast are considered key motivational drivers that co-configure behavioral and experiential interpretations (Yang & Wong, 2012).

However, conceptual tensions arise when this framework is applied to domestic tourism. In contexts characterized by shared language, symbolic repertoires and social norms, difference is not the dominant experiential condition. Instead, familiarity, recognition and continuity of meaning become salient (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013) (Richards, 2018). This shift requires moving from a paradigm centered on cultural distance towards one of cultural proximity, where perceived similarity enhances experiential coherence and symbolic interpretation, rather than merely reducing uncertainty.

Cultural proximity can be understood as a multidimensional state encompassing linguistic affinity, shared social practices, identification with heritage symbols and prior exposure to cultural expressions (Straubhaar, 1991) (Smith, 2006). These elements have been shown to reduce cognitive distance and to foster emotional and symbolic resonance with place. In this study, cultural proximity is not modelled as a statistical variable; instead, it serves as the interpretive theoretical lens through which domestic tourism experiences in culturally familiar environments are understood.

2.2. The Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM)

The Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM) is a conceptual framework that reframes the domestic tourism experience in protected areas as a multidimensional experiential system composed of six interrelated dimensions:

- Natural factors
- Cultural factors
- Accessibility factors
- Administrative factors
- Complementary factors
- Communication factors

These dimensions integrate environmental, infrastructural, managerial, service-related, and communicative components. Collectively, these elements jointly shape the experience. The ACPM adopts a systemic perspective, emphasizing structural interrelationships among experiential domains. In contrast to linear prediction of a single outcome, this approach considers the interconnected nature of these domains, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the system as a whole.

In the context of protected areas, natural factors refer to the scenic, ecological and environmental attributes that motivate visitation (Buckley, 2009) (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2013). Cultural factors encompass heritage, traditions, gastronomy and interactions with local communities that generate symbolic engagement (McKercher & du Cros, 2002) (Richards, 2018). Accessibility

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encompasses both physical infrastructure and symbolic inclusiveness, which influence participation (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). Administrative factors include governance quality, management effectiveness and perceived safety (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Complementary factors include auxiliary services such as food, lodging and recreational facilities, which co-configure experiential comfort (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016). The factors relevant to communication include the influence of digital media, interpretation systems and information flows in shaping expectations and meaning construction (Sigala, 2018) (Li & Cao, 2022).

Rather than predicting a single outcome variable, the ACPM configures how these six dimensions are structurally interconnected in configuring the domestic tourism experience, interpreted through cultural proximity.

2.3. Micro-Distances in Domestic Tourism

Even within shared national cultures, tourists experience subtle variations derived from regional identity, social background and cultural capital. Visitors may interpret culturally familiar environments through a variety of experiential frames, producing what may be termed micro-distances (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013). These intra-national variations do not contradict proximity; they introduce nuances to how authenticity, meaning and symbolic resonance are constructed within shared cultural contexts.

2.4. Hypotheses Development

The ACPM proposes structural interrelationships among experiential dimensions, consistent with a systemic model. These are drawn from nature-based tourism theory (Crompton, 1979) (Mehmetoglu, 2007), heritage tourism research (Richards, 2018) (McKercher & du Cros, 2002), and destination management literature (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011) (Sigala, 2018).

Natural–Cultural Interdependence

Natural landscapes in protected areas frequently function as cultural landscapes embedded with symbolic and historical meanings (Smith, 2006). Therefore, it can be concluded that environmental attributes have the capacity to covary with the manner in which cultural heritage is perceived and interpreted. .

H1. Natural and Cultural dimensions are expected to exhibit strong structural association.

Natural Factors and Experiential Support Dimensions

The quality of the environment is often a high experiential salience factor in how visitors interpret infrastructure, services and accessibility conditions. It is therefore important to consider the scenic and ecological attributes, as these may covary with perceptions of complementary services and access-related features (Buckley, 2009) (Newsome, Moore, & Dowling, 2013).

H2. Natural, Accessibility, and Complementary dimensions are expected to display significant structural associations.

Cultural Factors and Communication

Cultural heritage interpretation is strengthened through the use of narratives, interpretive media and digital storytelling. These methods translate symbolic resources into experiential meaning (Richards, 2018) (Sigala, 2018).

H3. Cultural and Communication dimensions are expected to exhibit strong structural association.

Administrative and Complementary Interdependence

The quality of governance and the provision of services are usually seen as part of the same system, working together to create a sense of coherence for the customer (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

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H4. Administrative and Complementary dimensions are expected to show strong structural association.

Accessibility and Communication

Access to information systems, signage, and digital orientation tools facilitates both physical mobility and symbolic understanding of place (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011) (Sigala, 2018).

H5. Accessibility and Communication dimensions are expected to display structural association.

Systemic Configuration

The domestic tourism experience in protected areas is conceptualized as a system of mutually reinforcing experiential domains, rather than a linear cause–effect chain.

H6. The six ACPM dimensions form an interconnected experiential system interpreted through cultural proximity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. An initial qualitative phase informed instrument development, followed by a quantitative phase. The latter was used to test the structural configuration of relationships proposed in the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The design was appropriate because the ACPM required contextual grounding prior to statistical validation in a domestic tourism setting.

The qualitative phase was instrumental in refining the construct and generating items, while the quantitative phase focused on measurement validation and structural modelling through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The objective was not to generate theory, but rather to operationalize and validate a theoretically specified experiential framework through empirical means.

3.2. Qualitative Phase: Construction Grounding and Item Generation

The qualitative stage was instrumental in refining constructs and ensuring the contextual relevance of the measurement instrument, rather than generating new theory.

Four participants with expertise in the fields of tourism research and protected-area management took part. All had prior research or professional experience in nature-based tourism, destination management, and cultural heritage interpretation, ensuring informed evaluation of experiential dimensions relevant to domestic tourism in Cotopaxi National Park (CNP).

Procedure:

Semi-structured expert interviews were conducted in order to assess experientially relevant elements associated with visits to CNP. The following topics were the primary focus of the discussions:

- experientially salient dimensions associated with visitor experiences in protected areas
- the interaction between environmental and cultural meanings
- management and governance conditions
- the structural position of communication and interpretation in shaping experiential understanding
- The aim was to assess the conceptual coverage and contextual adequacy of dimensions derived from the literature.

Analysis:

The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Expert feedback was systematically coded and organized into higher-order themes, thereby confirming the relevance of six experiential domains:

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- Natural attributes
- Cultural–symbolic elements
- Accessibility
- Administrative management
- Complementary services
- Communication and digital interpretation

These domains were used to refine item wording, eliminate ambiguities, and ensure the content validity of the survey instrument. The qualitative phase was thus instrumental in providing expert validation, thereby facilitating scale development within the ACPM framework.

3.3. Quantitative Phase

3.3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The study population comprised Ecuadorian domestic tourists aged 18+ who visited CNP between March 2022 and October 2023. According to the Ministry of Tourism (2023), the estimated number of domestic visitors during this period was 204,956.

A stratified, non-proportional sample with optimal allocation was used [22], stratified by region of residence (Coast, Highlands, Amazon, Islands). The sample size was calculated for a finite population at a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), with a margin of error of ±3% and maximum variance ($p = q = 0.5$).

3.4. Instrument Development and Validation

A structured questionnaire was developed iteratively (literature review → expert appraisal → pilot → psychometric validation).

- The operationalization process incorporated adapted items from validated scales (Yang & Wong, 2012) (Lee, Choi, Yoo, & Oh, 2018) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (Spenceley, Snyman, & Eagles, 2019)
- The content validity of the study was assessed by four experts in sustainable tourism and quantitative methods. The assessment revealed that all items achieved Aiken's $V > 0.80$, indicating that they are highly valid.
- A pilot involving 120 domestic tourists has confirmed internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$ across constructs).
- The final instrument comprised seven sections (A–G), including sociodemographic data and the six ACPM dimensions. Most items used a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree", 5 = "Strongly agree").
- Items related to Risk Management and Safety were included in the initial instrument but did not retain sufficient psychometric distinctiveness during CFA and were therefore integrated into the Administrative dimension. See Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the Questionnaire for Inbound or Domestic Tourists.

Section	Main Constructs (Variables)	Example Item	Scale	Number of items
A	Sociodemographic Data	Age, nationality, educational level	Mixed	12
B	Natural Factor (Lee, Choi, Yoo, & Oh, 2018) (Martínez Leal & Rojo Gil, 2019)	"The scenic beauty of the Cotopaxi volcano is impressive"	5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree, 5: Strongly agree)	6
C	Cultural Factor (De La Torre, Ollero, & Millán,	"The interaction with local communities was authentic"		7

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	2022) (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013)			
D	Accessibility (Porto & Rucci, 2019) (Shaker, Martinez, & Anderson, 2020)	"The access roads to the park are in good condition."		4
E	Tourism Management and Facilities (Franceschinis, Swait, Vij, & Thiene, 2022)	"The facilities (restrooms, viewpoints) are adequate."		5
F	Risk Management and Safety (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998) (Lepp & Gibson, 2003)	"I felt safe with the information provided about risks."		6
G	Communication and Media (Li & Cao, 2022) (Tasci, 2008)	"What medium was your main source of information?"	Mixed (Likert and multiple choice)	8

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Fieldwork was conducted from March 2022 to October 2023, employing a combination of on-site and online data collection methods to enhance representativeness and minimize sampling bias.

- On-site (60%): Trained interviewers administered surveys at entrances, visitor centers and main trails across diverse days and seasons.
- Online (40%): Following the visit, questionnaires are distributed by authorized tour operators via Google Forms.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

3.6.1. Stage 1 — Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics, missing data (Little's MCAR), normality checks.

3.6.2. Stage 2 — Psychometric Validation

- CFA (AMOS v.26)
- Factor loadings > 0.50
- Reliability: α and $\omega > 0.70$
- Convergent validity: AVE > 0.50, CR > 0.70
- Discriminant validity: HTMT < 0.85. The high association reflects experiential integration of governance and service provision rather than construct redundancy, consistent with systemic experience theory.

3.6.3. Stage 3 — Structural Modelling

SEM estimated interrelationships among ACPM dimensions, not prediction of an outcome variable.

Model fit criteria:

$\chi^2/df < 5$, CFI > .90, TLI > .90, RMSEA < .08, SRMR < .08. (Hu & Bentler, 1999)

Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) assessed indirect paths.

3.6.4. Bias and Robustness Checks

- Common method bias: Harman's single-factor test (<40%)
- Non-response bias: early vs late respondents ($p > .05$)
- Statistical power: >0.95

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4. Results

4.1. Profile of domestic tourists

The socio-demographic and behavioral profile (n = 1,113) reveals a predominantly young, educated domestic segment concentrated in the Andean region.

The majority of respondents (96.6%) were residents of the Highlands, thereby confirming the strong regional concentration of domestic flows towards Cotopaxi National Park (CNP). The mean age of the participants was 30.4 years (SD not shown), with 58.6% aged between 18 and 28. This indicates that young adults represent a dominant visitor segment in nature-based domestic tourism.

The gender distribution was balanced, with 49.2% of the population identifying as male and 50.8% as female. A significant proportion of respondents were single (69.1%), a trend commonly linked to brief leisure and group-oriented mobility.

The level of educational attainment was notably high, with 52.8% of the population holding a professional degree and 35.5% having completed secondary education. This indicates that a significant proportion of the visitor segment possesses substantial human capital, making them a valuable asset to the local economy.

Expenditure levels were modest (M = USD 41.26): 81.6% spent ≤ USD 50 per day, reflecting cost-conscious consumption typical of emerging domestic tourism systems.

Travel behavior was characterized by a strong social dimension, with 84% of respondents travelling in groups, predominantly in small teams of two to four people (57.2%). Furthermore, private vehicles were the primary mode of transportation for 86.7% of individuals, underscoring a significant reliance on personal mobility for accessing protected areas.

The motivations for visits align with the ecological orientation of the site, with contact with nature (51%) being the predominant factor, followed by recreation/sports (28.4%) and adventure (18.1%). Cultural engagement was of secondary importance, although it was present to a certain extent, particularly through crafts and gastronomy (52.8%) and community-based cultural tourism (30.9%).

The typical domestic visitor to CNP is young, educated, group-oriented and economically rational. They prioritize natural environments and social interaction, with moderate engagement in cultural elements. This profile aligns with the study's framing of domestic tourism as grounded in familiarity, shared cultural codes, and identity-relevant landscapes. (See Table 2.)

The study adhered to the ethical standards for non-interventional social research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, anonymity was guaranteed, and no sensitive personal data were collected.

Table 2. Profile of Domestic Tourists Visiting Cotopaxi National Park.

Location			**Age ranges**		
Coast	35	3.10%	18 – 28	652	58.60%
Highlands	1075	96.60%	29 – 38	212	19.00%
East	2	0.20%	39 – 48	154	13.80%
Island	1	0.10%	Mean age	30,4	
Gender			**Marital status**		
Male	548	49.20%	Single	769	69.10%
Female	565	50.80%	Married	265	23.80%
			Level of education		
Travel companions			Secondary	395	35.50%
Alone	178	16.00%	Professional	588	52.80%
With companions	935	84.00%	**Average daily expenditure (USD)**		
			<= $50	908	81.60%

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Number of companions			$51 - $100	162	14.60%
One companion	85	7.60%	Mean	41,26	
Between 2 and 4 companions	637	57.20%	**Transportation**		
Between 5 and 7 companions	166	14.90%	Private vehicle	965	86.70%
Traveling alone	178	16.00%	Public transport	116	10.40%
			Travel agency	25	2.20%
Main Travel Motivation			**Festival or cultural activity attended**		
Recreation / Sports	316	28.40%	Cultural/community tourism	344	30.90%
Adventure (extreme activities)	201	18.10%	Local crafts and products (enterprises)	588	52.80%
Contact with nature	568	51.00%	Folkloric/cultural events	84	7.50%

Note. Values represent valid percentages. Source: Field data (2022–2023).

4.2. Descriptive Analysis of Perceptual Dimensions

Mean evaluations show that there is a difference in how salient the ACPM dimensions are from the visitors' perspective.

Natural Factors received the highest ratings (M = 4.13; SD = 1.07), confirming the experiential prominence of environmental aesthetics and ecological quality in shaping domestic experiences in protected areas.

The factors of communication and digital media were also given high value (M = 3.99; SD = 1.18), suggesting that interpretive media and digital information occupy a prominent structural position in the creation of meaning through experience. Greater dispersion reflects heterogeneity in digital engagement.

Administrative factors were positively evaluated (M = 3.90; SD = 1.03), indicating general approval of management performance and organizational conditions.

Cultural factors obtained moderately high scores (M = 3.77; SD = 1.07), which supports the interdependence between environmental and symbolic elements proposed in the ACPM.

The lower evaluations observed for 'Complementary Factors' (M = 3.49; SD = 1.02) suggest variability in perceptions of auxiliary services, such as food, signage and additional facilities.

The accessibility factors received the lowest ratings (M = 3.24; SD = 1.09), indicating that mobility and infrastructure constraints are the primary functional limitations within the experiential system.

Overall, domestic tourism experiences in CNP are grounded in environmental and symbolic–communicative dimensions. However, infrastructural and service-related attributes show greater variability and improvement potential. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Summary of Domestic Tourists' Perceptions of Cotopaxi National Park.

Factors	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	Interpretation
Natural	N22–N26	4.13	1.071	1.151	Strong appreciation of scenery and biodiversity
Cultural	N32–N37	3.77	1.073	1.17	Moderate interest; complements natural motives
Accessibility	N41–N44	3.24	1.093	1.199	Infrastructure and mobility limitations

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Administrative	N51–N55	3.9	1.033	1.067	Positive evaluation of management and staff
Complementary	N61–N66	3.49	1.024	1.097	Mixed performance; safety and signage valued
Communication and Digital Media	N73–N75	3.99	1.18	1.408	Strong interest in digital/immersive promotion

Note. Scale 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree.

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA validated the six-factor structure of the ACPM.

All standardized loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded 0.60, supporting convergent validity. The composite reliability score ranged from 0.78 to 0.95 and the AVE exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, confirming internal consistency.

Two accessibility items (N43, N44) were removed because due to loadings of less than 0.50. (See Table 4.)

Table 4. Standardized Factor Loadings and Reliability Statistics.

Construct	Item	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	Standardized Estimate
Natural	N26	1	–	–	0.859
(CR = .95; AVE = .75)	N25	1.023	0.023	44.658***	0.883
	N24	1.033	0.029	35.581***	0.865
	N23	1.026	0.028	36.901***	0.87
	N22	1.109	0.032	34.849***	0.87
Cultural	N37	1	–	–	0.828
(CR = .92; AVE = .61)	N36	0.991	0.029	34.732***	0.785
	N35	1.043	0.03	34.342***	0.86
	N34	1.007	0.031	32.889***	0.835
	N33	0.936	0.034	27.319***	0.736
	N32	0.95	0.037	25.912***	0.706
Administrative	N55	1	–	–	0.787
(CR = .93; AVE = .68)	N54	0.99	0.033	29.925***	0.812
	N53	1.034	0.034	30.431***	0.827
	N52	1.098	0.034	32.427***	0.863
	N51	1.055	0.036	29.557***	0.809
Accessibility	N42	1	–	–	0.598
(CR = .78; AVE = .57)	N41	1.697	0.094	17.969***	0.863
Complementary	N65	1	–	–	0.807

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(CR = .88; AVE = .57)	N64	0.928	0.034	27.563***	0.77
	N63	0.795	0.039	20.466***	0.634
	N62	0.857	0.037	22.988***	0.69
	N61	1.014	0.035	28.852***	0.799
Communication	N74	1	–	–	0.794
(CR = .90; AVE = .74)	N73	1.191	0.04	30.116***	0.92

Note. All loadings significant at $p < 0.001$.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. While the majority of constructs met the criterion, the correlation between administrative and complementary factors was high (r = 0.87). This indicates that experiential coupling is likely to be significant, rather than measurement redundancy, given the cognitive integration of governance and service provision in visitor evaluations. (See Table 5.)

Table 5. Correlation Matrix and Discriminant Validity.

Construct	Natural	Cultural	Administrative	Accessibility	Complementary	Communication
Natural	****.866****	.728	.659	.583	.639	.725
Cultural	.728	****.781****	.645	.534	.667	.614
Administrative	.659	.645	****.825****	.787	.871	.716
Accessibility	.583	.534	.787	****.755****	.708	.693
Complementary	.639	.667	.871	.708	****.755****	.680
Communication	.725	.614	.716	.693	.680	****.860****

Note. Diagonal values represent √AVE. Off-diagonal values are latent correlations. All correlations are positive and significant ($p < 0.01$).

4.4. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) Results

SEM examined the covariance structure and directional interrelations among ACPM dimensions. It did not examine relational pathway on a dependent outcome.

Table 6. Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Six-Factor Measurement Model.

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Cutoff	Interpretation
Absolute Fit Measures			
χ^2/df ratio	5.497	<3 (good), <5 (acceptable)	Acceptable
RMSEA	.064 [.060-.067]	<.06 (good), <.08 (acceptable)	Acceptable
SRMR	0.056	<.08	Good
GFI	0.901	>.90	Acceptable
AGFI	0.87	>.80	Acceptable

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Incremental Fit Measures			
CFI	0.95	>.95 (excellent), >.90 (acceptable)	Excellent
TLI	0.939	>.95 (excellent), >.90 (acceptable)	Acceptable
NFI	0.939	>.90	Good
IFI	0.95	>.90	Excellent
Parsimony-Adjusted Measures			
PGFI	0.687	>.50	Acceptable
PNFI	0.776	>.50	Good
PCFI	0.785	>.50	Good

Note. χ^2 (248) = 1363.30, $p < 0.001$.

It is evident from the indices that the ACPM adequately represents the covariance structure among experiential dimensions. Please find below a summary of the structural relationships:

- Natural and cultural dimensions display strong structural coupling.
- Administrative ↔ Complementary: very strong association, indicating integrated perceptions of management and services.
- Communication ↔ Natural/Cultural: strong connections, suggesting digital mediation amplifies environmental and symbolic meanings.
- Accessibility → Administrative/Communication: moderate paths, indicating infrastructural conditions co-configure perceptions of governance and information environments.

The ACPM thus operates as an interconnected experiential configuration structured according to the cultural proximity organizing principle.

4.5. Indirect relational pathway and common method bias

Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) revealed significant indirect effects:

- Accessibility → Administrative → Communication ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$)
- Complementary → Administrative → Communication ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$)

Functional conditions therefore co-varies with interpretive environments indirectly through governance perceptions.

Harman's single-factor test showed the first factor explained 32% of variance. A CFA marker-variable test found no dominant method factor, indicating common method bias is unlikely to threaten validity.

5. Discussion

5.1. Redefining the Domestic Tourist Experience

The findings provide substantial empirical evidence in support of the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM), confirming that the domestic tourism experience in protected areas functions as a multidimensional experiential configuration rather than a linear evaluation process.

Natural factors occupy a position of high experiential prominence within the experiential system, emphasizing environmental aesthetics as the primary experiential focus in protected-area tourism. The significant interconnection of cultural and communication aspects suggests that domestic tourism is increasingly driven by symbolic recognition and the construction of mediated meanings, rather than by the pursuit of novel experiences.

This reframing challenges the long-standing cultural distance theory, which has traditionally explained tourist behavior through the prism of contrast and unfamiliarity. In domestic contexts, the focus is less on exploring the 'other' and more on re-establishing a sense of self. Protected areas such

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as Cotopaxi function as cultural mirrors, where landscapes act as repositories of national memory, heritage, and collective symbolism. The tourism experience is therefore a process of identity reaffirmation through environmental and symbolic engagement.

Rather than modelling satisfaction, the ACPM demonstrates how experiential coherence emerges from the interdependence of environmental, cultural, managerial and communicative domains within a culturally proximate setting.

5.2. Cultural Proximity as an Integrative Lens

The validation of the six-dimensional structure confirms that cultural proximity operates as an interpretive lens, linking environmental perception, symbolic meaning, and communicative mediation.

The strong association between the natural and cultural dimensions is empirically supported, thus supporting the concept of cultural landscapes. This is because environmental appreciation is inseparable from symbolic recognition and heritage attachment. It is important to note that landscapes are not neutral scenic resources; rather, they are socially and historically embedded spaces.

Digital mediation further extends this symbolic environment. In the tourism contexts, communication systems are vital for sharing information, building relationships, and facilitating collaboration. These systems include interpretive media, social platforms, and digital narratives, which serve as tools to enhance the significance of information, encourage authentic participation, and promote shared interpretation. In this context, tourism evolves from passive observation to a shared symbolic experience.

The presence of micro-distances adds nuance to the proximity framework. Even within a shared national culture, experiential interpretations vary according to regional identity and cultural capital. Therefore, cultural proximity is indicative of a continuum of shared meanings, rather than of homogeneity.

5.3. Management and Accessibility Implications

Accessibility was the lowest-rated dimension, indicating that infrastructural and inclusivity constraints limit the functional integration of the experiential system. The conditions relating to physical access are structurally associated with how visitors establish connections between environmental and symbolic dimensions, thereby affecting the overall coherence of the experience.

The close relationship between administrative and complementary factors indicates that visitors thoughtfully combine governance, quality and service delivery into a single evaluative framework. Therefore, management is not viewed as a background operational layer, but rather as a structural component of experiential stability. This component co-configures trust, safety and organizational legitimacy.

5.4. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

1. The conceptual inversion of cultural distance theory

The ACPM demonstrates that continuity, familiarity and symbolic recognition serve as primary experiential reference domain in the context of domestic tourism. This shift in theoretical focus moves the emphasis from the concept of difference to that of belonging.

2. The structural position of identity in experiential organizing principle

Symbolic identity engagement is a core meaning-making process that is embedded in environmental and cultural perception. This expands the field of tourism theory beyond motivational models.

3. Systemic operationalization of domestic tourism experience

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The validated six-dimensional ACPM offers a replicable framework that integrates environmental, cultural, managerial, infrastructural, and communicative elements into a unified experiential system applicable across culturally rich protected areas.

5.5. Positioning within International Tourism Research

International tourism research emphasizes cultural distance as a determining factor of perception and behavior. In contrast, domestic tourism operates through experiential coherence grounded in shared symbolic systems. The ACPM captures this coherence by modelling interdependencies rather than cause– relational pathway chains.

Domestic tourism in protected areas such as Cotopaxi is therefore an intimate cultural practice, where identity, memory and environment are symbolically negotiated within familiar landscapes.

The ACPM establishes cultural proximity as an analytical framework in its own right. This framework serves to broaden tourism behavior models beyond distance-based paradigms.

6. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

6.1. Managerial Implications

The empirical validation of the ACPM suggests that domestic tourism in protected areas should be managed as an integrated experiential system, where environmental, symbolic, managerial, and communicative elements operate interdependently.

1. Destination management with a focus on identity

Protected areas serve a dual purpose, functioning as ecological assets while also representing identity-bearing cultural landscapes. The correlation between the natural and cultural domains indicates a symbiotic relationship, where environmental appreciation is intricately linked with symbolic recognition. Management strategies should therefore incorporate heritage symbols, local narratives, oral histories, and collective memory into interpretive systems, signage, and visitor routes. This will reinforce emotional attachment and cultural continuity.

2. The structural position of communication in the construction of meaning

The importance of communication in the experiential configuration suggests that meaning is increasingly co-configured through digital and interpretive means. It is recommended that destination managers consider adopting digital storytelling, immersive interpretation tools and participatory social-media strategies. These tools enable visitors to co-create narratives. In a business context, communication should prioritize symbolic resonance and cultural continuity over visual promotion.

3. Accessibility as experiential inclusion

Accessibility was the lowest-rated dimension, indicating infrastructural and inclusivity gaps. Improving transport connectivity, universal design, and interpretive signage enhances not only physical mobility but also symbolic inclusion, ensuring that diverse social groups can participate in nationally meaningful landscapes. This initiative is consistent with the objective of SDG 11.7, which calls for equitable access to public spaces.

4. Integrated governance and service ecosystems

The strong association between the administrative and complementary dimensions suggests that visitors perceive governance quality and service provision as a unified experiential domain. Effective management is contingent on the coordination of governance systems involving public agencies, communities, and private operators. Transparency in administration, safety assurance, and service coherence are high experiential salience factors in ensuring stability and trust.

5. Domestic tourism as a tool for sustainability

Tourism based on cultural proximity can support regional economies while reducing reliance on carbon-intensive international travel. The ACPM provides a framework for aligning experience

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design with sustainability goals. This supports diversification of tourism supply, the preservation of cultural landscapes and the reinforcement of social cohesion.

6.2.. Potential Areas for Future Research

The ACPM opens up a number of different research pathways:

Cross-Context Validation

Testing the model in coastal, Amazonian, and insular domestic destinations would help determine whether the structural configuration of experiential dimensions remains stable across ecological and cultural contexts.

Longitudinal Analysis

Future studies could examine how perceptions of cultural proximity evolve under digital transformation, generational shifts or socio-political change.

Micro-Distance Operationalization

The development of measurement scales to capture international cultural variation would refine our understanding of how shared identity coexists with experiential differentiation.

Affective and Neuro-Tourism Approaches

The integration of psychophysiological or affective analytics could provide deeper evidence on emotional engagement and symbolic identity processes in domestic travel.

7. Conclusions

The study examined domestic tourism through the lens of cultural proximity by developing and empirically validating the Applied Cultural Proximity Model (ACPM) in Cotopaxi National Park. The findings demonstrate that the domestic tourism experience in protected areas is configured as a multidimensional experiential system, structured through the interrelation of the following dimensions: natural, cultural, administrative, accessibility, complementary, and communication. The model showed acceptable structural fit, as indicated by a CFI of 0.95 and an RMSEA of 0.064. These indices confirm the adequacy of the integrated experiential structure.

In the examined system, natural attributes were found to be the key contributions reference domain, while cultural and communication dimensions occupy a structurally prominent role in symbolic engagement and organizing principle. These results indicate that domestic tourism operates through familiarity, continuity, and identity resonance, rather than novelty as the dominant experiential organizing principle.

Theoretically, the ACPM reframes the logic of cultural distance. In relatively homogeneous cultural settings, proximity provides the interpretive framework through which environmental, managerial and communicative attributes acquire experiential meaning. Visiting protected areas thus functions as a symbolic practice of belonging, where national identity, collective memory, and heritage landscapes are experientially rearticulated.

Methodologically, the study provides a validated multidimensional framework suitable for replication in culturally rich domestic tourism contexts, particularly in the Global South. By integrating tangible (natural, infrastructural) and intangible (symbolic, communicative) dimensions, the ACPM provides a scalable structure for analyzing how experiential coherence is configured in culturally familiar environments.

Managerially speaking, the findings indicate that protected areas should be conceptualized not only as ecological destinations but also as identity-relevant cultural landscapes. Integrating heritage

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interpretation, inclusive accessibility and digital mediation enhances experiential coherence and symbolic engagement, thereby supporting sustainability and social cohesion.

Domestic tourism in protected areas should therefore not be viewed as secondary to international travel; it constitutes a socially meaningful cultural practice that connects individuals to shared heritage and reinforces collective identity.

Future research should extend the ACPM to include diverse eco-cultural contexts, incorporating constructs such as place attachment, identity-based engagement, and behavioral intentions. Longitudinal and affective approaches may provide further insights into the emotional and cognitive interpretive organizing frame cultural proximity.

Overall, the ACPM provides a framework for understanding the socio-cultural logic of domestic tourism. It is theoretically grounded and empirically supported, and establishes cultural proximity as a central analytical principle for interpreting tourism within shared cultural environments.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at the website of this paper posted on Preprints.org.

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