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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Authenticity: the state-of-the-art in tourism geographies

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ABSTRACT

A leading concept in the field of tourism studies, authenticity has a unique relationship with tourism geographies. This state-of-the-art review focuses on this relationship. First, we identity key themes of authenticity research in tourism geographies: place and cultural heritage; place-based experiences; place and community identity. These themes capture ways that tourism geographies, bringing a spatial perspective to tourism place and people, engage with authenticity discourses, which emphasise the experienced and communicated meaningfulness of place and people. The evolution of this nexus of tourism geographies and authenticity towards richer, more nuanced, dynamic, and abstract understandings is shown. This advancement of the authenticity concept relating to tourism geographies is discussed as having enriched discourses around tourist experiences of and in place. Objective, subjective, and constructive dimensions of authenticity, have hereby been associated with the place-based experiences, activations, and social animations, of tourism geographies. Next, we investigate these themes to consider avenues that tourism geographies can advance the conceptualisation of authenticity, particularly through a focus on the production of space, co-creation practices, anti-tourism movements, and inclusivity. We propose these areas hold significant potential for future empirical and conceptual research considering the relations of place and people at the juncture of tourism geographies and authenticity.

1. Introduction

As a foundational concept of tourism research, authenticity has been examined and debated in papers appearing since the earliest journals dedicated to the field (Rickly, 2022). Much of the nascent research presented a dichotomous understanding of authentic versus inauthentic that was also commonly associated with value judgements of good versus bad. This came with a focus on material objects, such as handicrafts,

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art, and architecture, for which originality was valued over reproduction. However, such a dichotomous view of authenticity quickly presented problems for understanding the relationship between materiality of tourism and tourist experience.

Thus, tourism scholars began to question how 'inauthentic' places could yield perceptions of authenticity and authentic tourist experiences, which required a more nuanced approach to the concept. Objectivist approaches whereby authenticity is considered as a tangible quality found in an object (Cook, 2010), as appraised using external criteria (Pearce, 2007), were complemented by constructivist social process approaches. MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity recognised that tourist settings present socially constructed tableaus of essentialist authenticity. Hence, tourists must negotiate such staging in determining their encounters with and sensations of authenticity. More convincing staging in terms of verisimilitude might enhance tourist's sensations of authenticity (i.e. Bruner, 1994), whilst demographic factors and individual interests can play a role in determining the willingness to negotiate types of staged experience (Gardiner et al., 2022).

However, recognition was also that high levels of authenticity can be perceived by tourists even when staging is manifest (Chhabra et al., 2003). Rather than an essentialist quality to tourism settings, sensations of authenticity may instead be stimulated *via* the relationships between tourists, sites, and staging that occur in such settings (MacCannell, 2014). In this way, authenticity is emergent within (Cohen, 1988) and a value resultant of social processes and cultural values (Cook, 2010). Research exploring authentication, or how values and qualities of authenticity are assigned to tourism objects and experiences (Lugosi, 2016), owes particular debt to Cohen and Cohen's (2012) outlining of authoritative (cool) and performative (hot) sociocultural processes, through which the authenticity of an attraction is established, maintained, and augmented. Lovell and Thurgill (2021) add that belief infuses authentication processes that are thusly imaginative as well as performative acts. In this way, experiences of authenticity have come to be appreciated as complex productions of personal history and knowledge, social processes, embodiment, and place (Buchmann et al., 2010). Individuals, objects, social environment, and other elements are equally and simultaneously important aspects of authenticity as a holistic concept (de Andrade-Matos et al., 2022).

Alongside these discussions of authenticity as relating to the genuineness or realness of artefacts or events, authenticity is articulated as a human attribute signifying being one's true self or being true to one's essential nature (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). In this existential sense, being authentic relates to activating the means to become more self-aware and self-possessed (Xue, Manuel-Navarrete & Buzinde, 2014). As such, authenticity in tourism may be associated with this activity as a platform for richer experiential encounters with oneself and with others (Shepherd, 2015). Considering the emotional connections of family tourists at the seaside, for example, Kelly (2022) describes our quest for connection with other significant humans in our lives, and with nature itself, are core existential conditions, that are not secondary to other aspects of tourism behaviour, but instead inform, filter, and differentially affect our experiences in time and space.

These various streams of authenticity in tourism are synthesised in Wang's (1999) influential articulation of authenticity. This theorises objective, constructive,

postmodern, and existential components, relating, respectively, to the authenticity of experiences as can be judged, interpreted, felt by participants, to the existential thoughts, feelings, and transformations that may be activated by experiences, and to the projection of tourists' culturally framed beliefs, expectations, preferences, and stereotyped images onto toured objects. Authenticity is thusly experienced by tourists through a process of negotiation between object and self, which are also context-specific (Mura, 2015).

Accordingly, authenticity relates to the more objective, physical, tangible experiences of tourism geographies. This includes such things as the connections between souvenirs and the places where they are produced (Markwick, 2001), presented (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2007), and as such the places that these objects imaginatively evoke-negotiate (Peters, 2011). Simultaneously, authenticity refers to the more subjective, personal, abstract sensations of inter/intrapersonal connection activated by experiences of tourism geographies. In this way, rather than an essentialist, objective quality, authenticity relates to a state of being (Rickly-Boyd, 2013), whereby tourists might be their true selves facilitated by such things as touristic escape from traditional roles back home (de Groot & van der Horst, 2014), or, conversely, through gaining a strengthened sense of such traditional roles and identities as reinforced through tourism (Lee et al., 2015). Concurrent with these different types of personally experienced authenticity are processes of social construction of authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Authenticity refers also to the social, constructed, performed nature of experiences and activations from experiences of tourism geographies. Tour operators for example, may act as gatekeepers determining what is authentic (Yea, 2002) or protected as such (Xue et al., 2014). In this way authenticity is not merely socially constructed but expressive of social relations which value people and places (Nost, 2012).

Following on from this broader introduction to authenticity in tourism, this state-of-the-art review is particularly interested in how this concept has evolved in relation to geographically informed tourism research. In what follows, we present three main themes of authenticity research found in papers published in the journal *Tourism Geographies*. Then, research opportunities and future directions are explored.

2. Trends in tourism geographies

A search of the papers published in the journal *Tourism Geographies* that included authentic, authenticity or authentication as keywords suggests three main themes of related research: place and cultural heritage; place-based experiences; place and community identity. Because the term authenticity and its derivatives are often used in purely descriptive ways, without analytic focus, the emphasis on the term among a paper's keywords is essential when examining research trends.

Tourism is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of study. Geographers bring a spatial perspective on tourism and its various relations with people and places. While that is a broad remit for the discipline, the research found at the intersections of authenticity and tourism geographies is decidedly place focused. In relation to authenticity, it is the meaningfulness of place and the meanings activated by place that are of particular relevance to conceptualising the experiential-existential

dimensions of authenticity. Thus, Cresswell (2004) describes that 'place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world" and "at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power' (p. 12).

There are multiple approaches for analysing places (e.g. phenomenological, existential, sociological), but from a critical geographical perspective, places are not only a cultural context for consumption (Urry & Larsen, 2011), but are 'objects of consumption; both symbolically as objects for hungry tourists and concretely as they are reconstructed as consumption sites' (Knudsen & Waade, 2010, p. 6). Places are described as mobile, open, hybrid, socially produced, contested and as objects of struggle between different social agents (Massey, 1998). Place as a complex of physical, social, cultural, and emotional qualities, is a part of the tourism experience (Rickly-Boyd, 2013), enacted through on-going performances and practices that may propagate or challenge cultural givens (Edensor, 2007). Authenticity, being a dynamic concept based on the relationship between people, places, and meanings is therefore closely connected to the material and immaterial dimensions of place in terms of its production, consumption, and contestation.

2.1. Place and cultural heritage

One of the main ways tourism geographies engages with authenticity debates is related to cultural heritage. These authors focus on the originality or accuracy of places and the cultures that reside in them, either historically or contemporaneously. In this way, authors are engaging the notion of place as housing historical lineage and a unique identity shaped by the people who live, or have lived, there. Thus, there is an emphasis on accuracy, not only of representing place and cultural uniqueness through tourism marketing and touristic consumption, but also a disapproving attitude towards exaggeration or 'Disneyification'.

Earlier research in this theme focussed on objective and constructive approaches to authenticity of art and handicrafts (Markwick, 2001) and representativeness of souvenirs and tourism marketing (Gibson & Connell, 2007; Hashimoto & Telfer, 2007; Peters, 2011). Drawing on concepts of staged authenticity, later research has explored presentation of cultural heritage as stimulating sensations of authenticity. Erb and Ong (2017) explore experienced-based consumerism and imagineered spaces. Tiberghien and Lennon (2022) suggest that more participatory, performance-based displays, support tourist immersion within heritage site atmospheres.

Such later examples move past notions of distinguishing and accessing the pure or natural authentic tourist experience from its impure commercialised alternative. They also bring the notion of authentication and the power of politics into the conversation. Jamal and Hill (2004) draw on an example of aboriginal cultural sites and argue that the politics of authenticity is also the politics of space, identity and heritage. Authentication as 'social processes involving a complex range of elements (material, ideas, practises and performances) which are linked to discourses outside the consumed tourism product' (Frisvoll, 2013, p. 273), draws attention from what authenticity is to what authenticity does (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

2.2. Place-based experiences

Exploring the relations among existential authenticity and place experience is another way that tourism geographies advance the concept of authenticity. These authors focus on the experience of place as essential to experiences of authenticity, and often do so through the concept of existential authenticity which emphasises emotional and embodied dimensions of experience. For example, articulating the spectral as part of the atmospheric aspects of place authenticity, Tiberghien et al. (2023) discuss the haunting of the present and uncomfortable confrontation with the future, brought about by intangible sensations of the past as the Baikonur Cosmodrome. 'These perceived haunted places of decayed buildings and remains of space heritage reinforced experiences of authenticity of the Soviet times and current geopolitical tensions' (p. 1460). Thus, performances and perceptions of experiential authenticity, and existential connections aroused by experiences, are relational and reciprocal (Tiberghien et al., 2017).

With this theme in mind, some authors emphasise interpersonal relations. Conran (2006) finds that tourists' interpretations of an authentic experience are entangled in their ability to procure an intimate encounter with toured others (see also Crossley, 2016). 'Ultimately, the intimate experience supersedes the desire for object authenticity, which may be perceived as superficial or secondary to the more humanist desire for reciprocal interaction' (Conran, 2006, p. 275). Similarly, Kelly (2022) teases out the interpersonal dimensions of authenticity in the performances of 'the family holiday' at the seaside. Furthermore, others focus on intrapersonal self-making practices in tourism places. For example, de Groot and van der Horst (2014) explore authenticity and escape as middle-class Indian youth find their 'true selves' in Gao.

In this sense, authenticity discourse within tourism geographies has evolved from a framing of physical challenges, sensory stimulation, and touristic communitas, as stimulating existential encounters and place connections (see Lew, 2011). Appreciation is towards these as simultaneous, shifting, and mutually constitutive imaginings in and of places.

2.3. Place and community identity

A third way that tourism geographies engage with authenticity debates is around community-based approaches to tourism development and the role of authenticity in residential belonging and place identity. Earlier studies in the context of cultural tourism and community identity discuss authenticity and its connection with spatiality and power relations (Yea, 2002) stressing the need to examine the contested nature of authenticity. As May (1996) articulates, at issue is not so much which place image or meaning is 'correct', but what are the material politics articulated by each vision. Meanings of authentic place are manifold within communities (Nost, 2012), and these meanings and their appropriate use are contested therein (Bianchi, 2003). As such, meaning of place is fluid, reworked through agency, struggle, and resistance (Tucker, 2007).

Tourism development has a complex relationship with sense of place, identity, and perceptions of belonging among community residents. This is because tourism can act as a force of homogenisation and heterogeneity thereby highlighting the crucial role of authenticity in preventing the destruction of identity and uniqueness of a place and alienation among its residents (Nost, 2012). While analysing the inextricable relationship between place, tourism development and authenticity in a Costa-Rican community, Nost (2012, p. 101) discusses how 'the portrayal of place in terms of authenticity creates social relations that are contested and reworked' and that authenticity of this portrayal is crucial for the social work it performs in terms of valuing, ordering, and reorganising people, places, and resources.

Often these portrayals of places as authentic involve a falsity of representation in place promotion and situations where host communities are forced to 'stage authenticity' under the guidance of external, third-party tour operators. The outcome of such staging is not only the emergence of a 'tourist space', that prevents the tourist from experiencing authenticity (Cohen, 1995) but also minimal or no interaction between tourists and local residents. These lead to the possibility of creation and perpetuation of cultural stereotypes, cultural hegemonic discourses, bureaucratic rationalisation of tourism development, commodification of cultural practices and Othering. This paves the way for feelings of threat to the community and a loss of agency, voice and belongingness and finally, tourismophobia and the rise of anti-tourism movements.

3. Research opportunities and future directions

Considering the above themes of tourism geographies research and the advancement of the authenticity concept, several potential future directions are suggested. These collectively build upon the existing themes or address gaps in the literature.

First, a broader gap in our understanding of authenticity is related to co-creation processes. The role of authenticity as a co-creator of value in cultural tourism experiences has also been pointed out by Ramkissoon and Uysal (2018). For example, Frenzel and Frisch (2022) take a step in this direction with their examination of the role of authenticity in the valorisation processes of tourism places *via* digital technologies and online platforms. While there has been some research on interpersonal dimensions of authenticity and the role of place (see Buchmann et al., 2010; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Skandalis et al., 2023), this has not taken account of a wide range of stakeholders and various types of value each may gain (or not) from engaging with tourism.

Second, building on the themes related to place experience and community identity, there appears to be a gap in our understanding of the relationship of anti-tourism movements and authenticity discourses, including those who drive such social movements, as well as perceptions of authenticity among tourists who encounter such protests. Over the past decade, studies are increasingly leveraging sustainability discourses, particularly related to stakeholder engagement and rights of marginalised communities by encouraging participatory, experiential, and co-creative measures, to advance an understanding of authenticity as central to social empowerment. For example, Dredge and Gyimóthy (2015) highlight the importance of sharing economy platforms in achieving a higher level of authenticity in resident-tourist exchanges and

in generating favourable and welcoming atmospheres for tourists. Thus, negotiating anti-tourist sentiments and tourismphobia revolving around issues of authenticity, may require careful and considerate planning and effort by the government to actively involve tourism-affected communities in the decision-making processes.

Third, thinking more broadly about potential theoretical and philosophical additions to the canon, Lefevbre's theory of the production of space, which has been central to geographic thoughts for decades, has not yet found its way into authenticity debates. Tourist space is a product of human intention where social and cultural changes manifest themselves (Shim & Santos, 2014). The production of space inherently engages with issues of power, while also considering the various ways space is produced: representations of space (conceived space), representational space (lived space), spatial practice (perceived space).

Finally, scholarship on authenticity has its gaps due to its geographical non-inclusiveness and its rootedness in a Western knowledge system where there has been a reluctance towards engaging in critical discussions on colonialism and anthropocentrism, and a minimal discourse using critical theoretical perspectives such as multiculturalism, postcolonialism and new materialism. Future studies can critically explore the role of authenticity as a tool for addressing spatial inequalities, decolonisation and social empowerment which will be particularly useful in tourism projects where dissonant heritage, indigenous groups and historically marginalised communities are involved (see Snake-Beings, 2023).

4. Conclusion

Following a review of the authenticity literature in *Tourism Geographies*, several research themes were identified: place and cultural heritage; place-based experiences; place and community identity. Across these themes, the concept of authenticity is engaged with in different ways. Place and cultural heritage tend to emphasise objective and constructive notions of authenticity. Place-based experiences research relies more on existential authenticity. Place and community identity draws upon various aspects of these approaches to authenticity along with problematising authentication processes.

Thus, through this research, tourism geographies advances the conceptualisation of authenticity by bringing the relations of people and place to the foreground on how we communicate and experience authenticity. This suggests further avenues for future research in the field around the notions of the production of space, co-creation practices, anti-tourism movements, and inclusivity.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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