

Authenticity and the tourist's search for Being

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a broad overview and opinion on the term 'authenticity' within the context of the Tourism industry and tourist expectations and it draws on extensive literature on the topic. An attempt to define 'authenticity' is indeed an intricate assignment; it clearly has different meanings in different cultures, societies, and in diverse settings. It is thus important to examine the term 'authenticity'. One of the main reason people travel abroad is to enjoy an "authentic" experience. They imagine travelling abroad and living in accommodation which is slightly different, tasting unique cuisines and participating in local activities while absorbing diverse cultures. The concept of authenticity has been debated in tourism literature for over four decades and the term 'authenticity' has a multiplicity of definitions. Tourists generally seek an authentic experience in which they can go beyond what Maslow termed 'self-actualization' and in fact discover a true sense of Being. Recognizing the great importance of authenticity is an opportunity for Africa's tourism industry and the desire of tourists to 'find themselves' by linking with authentic heritage, cultures and traditions presents huge opportunities for especially local communities. Tourists are not impressed by inauthentic pseudo sites and objects and tourism offerings and such like, and will travel to destinations that offer authenticity.

Key words: Authenticity, tourism, Social Constructivism, Existentialism

Introduction

"Tourism can be a powerful tool of development, but its potential can also be wasted. Too often tourism enterprises see each other only as competitors and end up frustrating visitors. Every destination talks about quality and exceeding visitors' expectations, but what is the spark that transforms a destination into something remarkable? It is the destination that has pride in itself and its people and is passionate about celebrating its heritage, its food, its landscapes and its people. Of course, authenticity does not guarantee sustainability, but without the celebration of "local distinctiveness" it is just "another resort". Carey (2006)

Wilmott and Nelson (2003) identify the intricacy of consumerism, with tourists as important consumers who are seeking new meaning in their lives, which is in line with Maslow's self-actualization concept. In fact, many tourists seek far more. While there is huge global poverty, there is also a huge global accumulation of wealth.

This means that tourists are seeking self-esteem and self-actualization because they recognize that they possess all that they require materially speaking. They thus spend large amounts of money on tourism services through which they hope to improve their lives and arrive at a sense of Being which they feel may be lacking. Tourists desire new experiences which are truly authentic and meaningful and in which they can discover their sense of Being. This is evident by, for example, the numbers of people travelling to inter-alia, game parks in Africa and the ruins of the Acropolis in Athens. Travelling domestically or abroad is considered a luxury experience and those who embark on such ventures have identified an authentic cultural experience as being the most important aspect and this applies across all age, gender and socio-demographic groupings. The

authentic experience is especially about avoiding areas and activities where there are multitudes of other tourists, and suggests that tourists desire to explore the untouched and unexposed (Yeoman, 2008). Research conducted by the Future Foundation, has uncovered that expensive holidays in faraway places are now viewed by consumers as the most important experience (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006).

Tourists seek to experience some relief from the mundane and exhausting daily activities which often threaten to overtake their lives (See Figure 1). Consequently many travel to escape and find themselves as they recapture a sense of authenticity (Pearce and Moscardo 1986). Tourism is a sign of wealth and even status and of course it is critical in national economies and all nations seek to bolster tourism so as to obtain much needed foreign exchange but what is it that tourists seek?

Generally tourists travel to exotic and far-flung destinations so as to seek out novel experiences and different ways of life. This gives a sense of worth and value to them and especially to those who are affluent since they are able to flaunt their achievement. They generally seek an authentic experience, and vigorously seek authentic experiences, during their holidays, so that they are able to return to their homes having experienced first-hand an unconventional or primitive lifestyle that is linked to history in some or other way (Littrell, Anderson and Brown, 1993).

MacCannell states that tourists search for the 'authentic', but they very often see fake things that have been created by the locals so as to keep them away from the authentic which is precious and which the latter wish to preserve. Consequently spaces created for tourists are very often sites of 'staged

authenticity' (Urry, 1995). Many tourists thus obtain a false perception of a culture or heritage which taints their experiences, although many are in reality apathetic to authenticity (Pearce and Moscardo, 1985).

Ritzer and Liska (1997) maintain that tourists seek even inauthentic experiences. Urry (2002) makes it abundantly clear that what tourists seek is often socially and historically created, and they tour for diverse reasons, and generally to view something they have not previously seen. There are also various 'authenticities' and there is undoubtedly a global belief that current mass tourism trends threaten the unique and natural state of both heritage and culture (Wang, 1999). Local populations inhabiting space where tourists visit believe to a large extent that their heritage and culture are precious assets which should not simply be simply surrendered for the sake of tourist entertainment and greater profits (Goulding, 2000).

What is Authenticity?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated that 'authenticity' referred to the personal integrity of people who are by nature what he termed 'noble savages'. Authenticity was in a sense ruined by the yearning of some to possess value in the eyes of others ('Rousseau', 2005). The existentialist philosophers Heidegger and Kierkegaard have interesting viewpoints. Heidegger equated authenticity with Being so that authenticity is linked with creativity. Each person must seek the authentic and not be 'given' what is authentic (Baird & Kaufmann, 2008). Kierkegaard states that authenticity depends on an individual finding authentic faith and becoming true to oneself and in order to obtain authenticity, one must face reality and derive one's own estimation of

existence (Holt, 2012). A number of researchers suggest that it is necessary to refresh the discussion on what authenticity means when it comes to the experience of tourists (Brown 1996; Wang 1999; Xie, 2004; Urry, 2002; MacCannell, 1999; Daniel 1996; Pearce and Moscardo 1986; Reisinger and Steiner 2005; Salamone 1997 and Selwyn 1996). Authenticity is defined in a variety but it has advanced into a notion that many will agree is now obsolete (Olsen 2007). The concept was first used in relation to objects in museums so as to enable discrimination by tourists between false objects and the real thing (Trilling, 1972). Some of the early theorists on tourism authenticity such as Boorstin (1961) and MacCannell (1973, 1976) who although had divergent views, favoured the notion that authenticity was objectively verifiable and that it could either positively or negatively motivate tourists.

MacCannell, in his, 'Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings' (1973), states that the modern tourist does not simply travel to feel satisfied, but is in fact seeking authenticity which is only sometimes achieved due to the manner in which tourism advertising and marketing is conducted and also by the way in which tourism operators and guides approach the issue of authenticity. Boorstin reproached mass tourism and believed that tourists enjoyed the attendance of "pseudo-events," which were brought about by the commodification of culture (Wang, 1999). This has been exacerbated by globalisation which has resulted in the spread of standardised tourism products and experiences. In fact the situation is so critical that local customs, culture, heritage and lifestyles are often lessened.

There is however an increasing number of tourists who desire to experience the authentic culture and heritage that is a

true reflection of the destination that they are visiting. "Pseudo-events" are by their nature inauthentic, and when tourists partake in them they are essentially replicating the false patterns that comprise their daily existence. Ironically, tourists tend to favour satisfying their own expectations and rarely enjoy experiencing authentic products as they manifest in foreign cultures (Boorstin, 1961). Boyle (2004) asserts that authenticity suggests that tourists are seeking a link with something that is real, unspoiled and only found within a particular destination. Authenticity must be linked to the destination and reside within the local community. This then suggests that authenticity brings with it strong development opportunities for local communities and thus sustainable tourism initiatives are increased (Carey, 2006). Tourist destinations should thus contribute towards the benefit of local communities and to make their offerings authentic.

MacCannell (1976) disagrees with Boorstin and contends that modern tourists are desirous of fleeing from the alienation of their daily existence and seek out authenticity when they travel abroad. MacCannell (1973) also expressed the opinion that tourists could go to either "front" or "back" regions. The latter are often staged to look like authentic regions so that tourists often falsely believe that they are experiencing something authentic, whereas in reality, they are simply experiencing a sham presentation which is disguised to appear as something authentic. Consequently tourists seek authenticity in the back areas. There is also object authenticity which is the "non contentious genuineness of an observable thing such as an artifact, fossil, or dress" (Reisinger and Steiner, 2005).

Wang (1999) stresses that when tourists are true to themselves this is usually achieved in relation to the principle of authenticity that exists in contemporary society and which is a response to the existential circumstances of modernity. Wang (1999) describes authenticity in a three pronged approach, namely via the theoretical underpinnings of objectivism, constructivism and postmodernism. Objective authenticity is also considered to be narrow in the sense that existential authenticity is a substitute means to view tourism. He further stresses that objects and even destinations that are toured are not necessarily authentic. Authenticity includes a sense of romanticism and nostalgia through which tourists come to idealize states in which they are "...supposed as freer, more innocent, spontaneous, purer, and truer to themselves than usual" (Wang 1999). Romanticism in authenticity emanates from the accent on naturalness "...and feelings in response to the self-constraints imposed by reason and rationality in modernity" (Wang 1999). Tourists thus engage tourism to discover their authentic self and develop their own authenticity. In existential authenticity there are two distinct sub-categories, namely the interpersonal and intrapersonal, which account for most tourism experiences. Cohen (2007) explains that authenticity per se is obsolete and is inappropriate for use in studies on tourism and there are in any event multiple definitions. Authenticity is also considered to be multi-facetted and open to discussion (Cohen 1988). He maintains that something which is initially considered to be inauthentic can become authentic over time in a process which he terms "emergent authenticity" (Cohen, 2007). Cohen also discusses six other definitions, namely: 'authenticity as customary practice or long usage; authenticity as genuineness in the sense of an unaltered product; authenticity as sincerity when applied to

relationships; authenticity as creativity with special relevance to cultural performances including dance and music; and, authenticity as the flow of life in the sense that there is no interference with the setting by the tourism industry or other managers' (cited in Pearce 2007). The definitions thus align with objective authenticity since they implicitly include the notion that in any situation faced by tourists their experience can be evaluated by using external measurements (Pearce 2007).

Olsen (2007) maintains that the original idea of authenticity is now passé. New ideas on authenticity are required. The Social Constructivists maintain that authenticity is founded on interpretation and is historically and culturally dependent. It is also considered to be socially constructed (Bruner 1994; Wood 1993). What is authentic thus is derived from the tourists rather than from what they view- it is a projection of their consciousness, beliefs and preferences and what they expect to see (Wang, 1999). We often find that a label of 'authenticity' is used to sell souvenirs, festivals, rituals, cuisine, clothing and accommodation. We are given the sense that these are made by local people', according to their 'heritage', 'custom' or 'tradition' (Wang, 1999).

Objective and other Authenticities

Objective authenticity by its nature provides that notion that things are inherently 'authentic' and 'original'. There are those who support the notion that tourists are in any case incapable of distinguishing between what is authentic and inauthentic (Kelleher, 2004). In tourism this includes artifacts, heritage sites, events, culture, folklore, cuisine, services, accommodation etc. Once these are modified in any way, the artifacts etc are regarded as inauthentic. Consequently we find for example

buildings and natural settings that are classified as having official heritage status. Certain authors such as Schoorl (2005) oppose such a notion and consider it to be outmoded since heritage, culture and tradition are dynamic in nature and cultures tend to reinvent themselves anyway. In a sense whatever we see as tourists is in some or other way has been subjected to personal perceptions and biases (Goulding, 2000). Objective authenticity thus refers to the authenticity of originals. The tourist who craves authentic experience equates this to an epistemological experience of the authenticity of the originals he/she sees. When we speak of existential authenticity we make reference to a potential existential state of Being that is set in motion by a range of tourist activities. In the same way, authentic experiences in tourism activate this existential state of Being within the liminal process of tourism in which there is conscious awareness of the authentic (Wang, 2000).

Constructivist theorists suppose that there is no real pre-existing world which is independent of human activity. Constructed authenticity is thus the act or process of projecting authenticity onto touristic objects, events etc by tourists in terms of their descriptions, expectations, predilections, beliefs, etc. (Schwandt, 1994). Essentially then, authenticity is thus constructed by a society based on particular viewpoints, beliefs and perspectives. So when tourists visit for example, a site they simply project their own expectations, beliefs, preferences, stereotypical views and even consciousness onto the site and believe it to be authentic once they believe their expectations have been met (Urry, 2002). Authenticity is thus something which pleases them and is to an extent negotiable and is as a result very often taken out of its original context. Many tourists undoubtedly understand that

they construct their own authenticity so that by visiting a Chinese restaurant in New York or London, it does not mean they are in China (Beeck, 2003).

There are those who proffer the belief that whether something is authentic or inauthentic is not important, because in the globalized world there is no longer a original to be used as a reference point (Wang, 1999). Hence there are many pseudo and staged environments today such as for example restaurants and zoos, and as these places are endowed with a sense of authenticity, they enable many tourists to transcend time and space, and escape their mundane daily existence.

This is happening in a world in which there is a growing relational global consciousness of biosphere politics (Rifkin, 2009) and people seek solace, sanctuary and self-fulfillment through tourism in times which are often turbulent (Young, 1999). In the burgeoning transmodern world which includes the reflective-living-systems paradigm (Elgin, 1997), tourists desire authenticity.

Conclusion

The world is in the process of a huge cultural transformation—in which human consciousness, values, worldviews, and paradigms, are rapidly shifting. The postmodernist view that most things are allowable cannot remain in place since there are many things that require value, such as culture and heritage, and there are thus a myriad of meanings that must be conserved. Failing this people in general will develop a contempt for life (Boff, 2009).

Although mass tourism's main purpose is to get visitors to attractions, whether authentic or contrived, it is important to retain authenticity since it still matters'

(Pearce, 2007). Mass tourism consumption of inauthentic and staged objects and sites must not be the driver since when this happens, countries lose their uniqueness and the richness of their cultures becomes diluted to such an extent that tourists obtain an illusionary representation of what a country is really about. When tourists travel to a destination, they seek more than the product of the destination, and also desire to experience the place as it truly is (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990). There are a number of need satisfying utilities both perceptible and imperceptible which are offered to the tourists for their consumption. These include places, services, objects, ideas, institutions and even personalities (Marx, 1989). For a country to be competitive in the global tourism arena, it is important to have products that are distinctive, uniquely authentic and distinguishable from others. There is consensus that whatever is 'original' or 'indigenous' needs to be sheltered from the 'evils of late-capitalism' (Taylor, 2001).

When tour operators sell a package they should thus seek to offer an authentic product that is truly reflective of the diversity of the culture of the country in which they operate. Inauthentic tourism offerings should not be used to bolster tourism receipts since culture and heritage are special and need to be carefully preserved. Cultural heritage attractions should thus be carefully planned as failure to do this could result in the disappearance of traditional cultures and will seriously threaten local communities.

Tourism should not be a pseudo-event or a drama that is packaged for tourists, devoid of authenticity (Boorstin, 1961). We should seek to avoid the homogenization which globalization is creating and preserve our unique identity. Research needs to be

conducted to understand how tourists feel about their visits to what they are told are authentic, but in reality are pseudo, inauthentic and staged sites. As Wang (1999) suggests, we must carefully consider the "existential states of Being" that is brought about by tourist activity and the personal or inter-subjective feelings which are activated by the liminal process of tourism. We should seek the authentic and balance between reason and emotion. Perhaps the promotion of Transmodernity will provide us with the necessary epistemological position to go beyond the many and varied (post)essentialist contradictions that we encounter.

When tourists engage in activities that facilitate an exploration of the authentic self, and thus strive for an "authenticity of Being," so as to be true to themselves, this is attained in relation to an ideal of authenticity that has developed in society as a response to the existential conditions of modernity (Wang, 1999).

Authenticity should however, as far as travel operators and marketers are concerned be anti-elitist, and make concerted efforts to include 'the visual, the aesthetic, the commercial and the popular' (Urry, 2002:78) but always be founded on the principles of community involvement, sustainability and ethical consumption. Tourism must not be fabricated but rather a natural phenomenon which is clearly associated with the destination to which the tourist is travelling. Consequently, tourism operators etc must be totally honest with visitors (Taylor, 2001) and allow tourists to truly benefit in the authentic sense of place as they seek themselves via their experiences. In any event, contact with the local must be real to be of true value to the tourists whilst also serving the purpose of preserving local culture and heritage.

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SEE FIGURE 1 ON PAGE 10

Figure 1: Getting away from it
(From Current issue in tourism: The authentic tourist by Ian Yeoman, Danna Brass and Una McMahon-Beattie) www.sciencedirect.com



