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Authenticity and commodification

Aims and objectives

This chapter explores the concept of authenticity in consumer research and tourism studies. The main objective is to understand, through a deep literature review, the different definitions authors attribute to the concept of authenticity and the authentic tourism destination. This chapter revolves around theories, and the challenges that tourism professionals face, and the implications of promoting world heritage destination based on the idea of authenticity. The first part of this chapter contains an outline of scientific research on the concept of authenticity and a summary of definitions in the literature. This depicts why the use of the concept of authenticity is very important for today's postmodern tourists who are looking for real experiences. The second part presents a classification of authenticity through the analysis of two examples in the tourism sector. The third part presents the city of Las Vegas as a case study introducing its tourism concept, its story and the tourists' expectations in terms of their quest for authentic tourism experiences.

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the debate on the concept of authenticity and its history in the field of tourism.
- Know the main classifications of authenticity and its meanings for tourists.
- Understand the influence of authenticity on a tourism destination.
- Understand the importance of authenticity for consumer/tourist preferences and choices of a destination.
- Know the marketing implications, in terms of authenticity, for promoting and improving the image of a destination.

Tourism brings both beneficial and adverse effects for local economies, residents, and the heritage destinations (Van Der Borg *et al.*, 1996). Thus, the commoditization of cultural heritage, which is increasingly popular in modern world might be destructing its authenticity, and reduce its exchange value (Goulding, 2000). From the managerial perspective, the dynamic nature of authenticity along with the process of its fabrication and control (authentication) is crucially important. Authenticity has been acknowledged as an international consideration and an essential driving force that motivates tourists to travel to distant places and different times (Naoui, 2004; MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988).

The pursuit of authentic experiences is considered as one of the key trends in tourism. Authenticity is therefore crucially important for tourism, from all the sectors, especially in heritage tourism (Yeoman *et al.*, 2007; *Tourism Trends for Europe*, 2006). Consequently, authenticity is considered as a basic and a particular interest for cultural heritage marketing. It is important to understand tourist motivation and behaviour as well as strategic and marketing implications concerning tourist destination management and the quest for authentic tourism experiences. Drawing on this approach, authors such as MacCannell (1973) and Cohen (1972) showed the importance of authenticity in tourism experiences and defined tourism activities as the modern quest for authenticity.

■ What does authenticity mean? And how tourists define it?

The concept of authenticity has been part of tourism literature since this word was first used in tourism studies by MacCannell (1973). Tourism scholars such as Pearce and Moscardo (1985), Littrell *et al.* (1993), Sharpley (1994), Urry (1995), Wang (1999), and more recently Cohen (2007), Olsen (2007), Pearce (2007) and others launched their scholarships on the concept of authenticity and tried to define it in various ways (see Table 8.1 for a summary of authenticity definitions). Furthermore, authenticity has been exposed to debates for decades (Cohen, 1995; Turner and Manning, 1988; Pearce and Moscardo, 1985;) without any consensus among authors on its definition. The objective of this chapter is to provide a summary of the definitions of the concept of authenticity in the multidisciplinary literature and try to find out how scholars from different perspectives conceive authenticity.

The analysis of the human science literature reveals that authenticity may be formulated as a value (Olsen, 2002), a motivational force (Naoui, 2004), a 'claim' (Peterson, 2005), a perception (Cohen, 1988), and the choice people make (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). Baudrillard (1983) has studied the concept of authenticity and has tried to explore and understand the way individuals perceive and define

authenticity in their everyday lives. This shows that the concept of authenticity is multidimensional and may be defined in various ways depending on the perspective and the discipline of the scholars who are studying it.

Authenticity is accordingly one of the crucially important values for tourism, especially in heritage tourism (Yeoman *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, authenticity is a central component of the image of tourism destinations that brand marketers take into account (Beverland, 2005) by offering brands with some heritage and a higher authenticity status. For Beverland 'authenticity is the context that is projected as a truthful story that involves the allowance of commitments to traditions, passion for craft and production excellence, and the public discredit of the role of the modern industrial attributes and commercial operation' (2005, p.1025). Thus, Beverland explored authenticity with the assumption that brand managers are responsible for its creation. Getz (1994) subscribed to this idea, pointing out that authenticity could be considered as part of the event product, because it is something that can motivate the tourists, and it is the benefit that can be partially controlled by organizers. This assumption leads Getz (2002) to conclude that the current success of special events has a positive relationship with tourists' satisfaction, who recognize the event which can deliver an 'authentic' experience (Getz, 1998)

For Cohen (1988), authenticity is defined as a dynamic concept which means different things to different people at different times. For example, museologists define authenticity in an objective way; it is all about whether object is genuine or not genuine (Wang, 2000). On the other hand, Peterson (2005) showed that authenticity is a claim and that 'authenticity work' can take in a number of shapes like ethnic/cultural identity, status identity, authentic experiences, technological mediation (e.g. Internet 'tribes'), or self-construction and appearance. Furthermore, Brass (2006) established a link between authenticity and sustainability. For Brass, authenticity is also linked to goodness and is not related to material. Therefore, authenticity and sustainability always go together where connections build a tourism product which belongs to their community. In this sense, Carey (2006) notes that sustainable tourism is tied up with authenticity; he states that, tourism which developed sustainably can create many social and economic opportunities for the destination community.

According to Boyle (2003), today's tourists are interested in connecting with consumption items and experiences that are real, pure and embedded within the destination. In this case, authenticity has to connect to the destination and estate in the community, hence the importance of community-based tourism through which the benefits go back into the community. Therefore, concepts such as 'authenti-seeking', which means searching for a non-material, authentic and deeper experience, are very popular among tourists. The Kawaza Village tour-