

Marketing Innovations for Sustainable Destinations

9 Perceived Authenticity of Cultural Heritage Sites: Towards an Integrative Conceptual Model

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Introduction

The quest for authentic experiences has long been considered one of the key drives in tourism (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Naoi, 2004). Authenticity is accordingly crucially important for tourism, especially heritage tourism (Apostolakis, 2003; Tourism Trends for Europe, 2006; Yeoman et al., 2007). It is helpful for understanding tourist motivation and behavior as well as strategic and tactical implications concerning tourist destination management.

However, an overview of the literature shows that despite its clear importance, authenticity is an insufficiently explored and problematic concept, which hinders its practical application (Wang, 1999). In terms of the nature and implications of this concept, various approaches and authors not only provide different, but often contradictory views. These are particularly noticeable when sociological and business/marketing views are compared. Such disputes largely go beyond the notion of variations in nuances and conceptualizations, rising to the level of 'ideological oppositions', since commoditization and marketing in tourism are often conceived as destructive forces and a direct antithesis of what is called authentic (for more on this issue, see Olsen, 2002; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Shepherd, 2002; Waitt, 2000). In addition, authenticity seems a highly controversial construct in itself. The fragmentation of the authenticity construct is reflected in the various definitions, interpretations and conceptualizations (e.g. Cohen 1988; Hughes, 1995; Olsen, 2002; Peterson, 2005). It is thus no surprise that Reisinger and Steiner (2006) conclude that the different views on (object) authenticity are conflicting and irreconcilable. Because of its problematic nature scholars should abandon the concept altogether. However, Belhassen and Caton (2006) argue that authenticity is indeed alive in the minds of tourists and managers and plays a significant function, so it is up to scholars to study it. What is more, we think that problematic notion(s) and aspects of authenticity should not be avoided but exposed and studied even more thoroughly in order to better understand them. The construct is highly relevant for understanding tourist behavior and important for tourism management, attracts an immense amount of academics' attention, stimulates a lot of endeavors in practice and transcends various disciplines. Its existence and importance therefore simply cannot be put in question, nor abandoned.

Chapter extract

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