



## RETHINKING AUTHENTICITY IN TOURISM EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at a conceptual clarification of the meanings of authenticity in tourist experiences. Three approaches are discussed, objectivism, constructivism, and post-modernism, and the limits of “object-related authenticity” are also exposed. It is suggested that existential authenticity is an alternative source in tourism, regardless of whether the toured objects are authentic. This concept is further classified into two different dimensions: intra-personal and inter-personal. This demonstrates that existential authenticity can explain a greater variety of tourist experiences, and hence helps enhance the explanatory power of the “authenticity-seeking” model in tourism. **Keywords:** authenticity, existential authenticity, tourism, tourist experiences © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Pour repenser l'authenticité dans les expériences du tourisme. Cet article vise à une clarification conceptuelle des significations de l'authenticité dans les expériences du tourisme. On discute de trois façons d'aborder le sujet: objectivisme, constructivisme et postmodernisme, en examinant au même temps les limites de “l'authenticité liée aux choses”. On suggère que l'authenticité est une source alternative en tourisme sans considérer si les objets visités sont authentiques. Ce concept est classifié en encore deux dimensions: interpersonnelle et intra-personnelle. Ceci démontre que l'authenticité peut expliquer un plus grand nombre d'expériences des touristes, ce qui aide à rehausser le pouvoir explicatif du modèle du “chercheur d'authenticité” du tourisme. **Mots-clés:** authenticité, authenticité existentielle, tourisme, expériences du tourisme. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

### INTRODUCTION

MacCannell (1973, 1976) introduced the concept of authenticity to sociological studies of tourist motivations and experiences two decades ago. Since then, the subject has become an agenda for tourism study (Brown 1996; Bruner 1989, 1994; Cohen 1979a, 1988; Daniel 1996; Ehrentraut 1993; Harkin 1995; Hughes 1995; Littrell, Anderson and Brown 1993; Moscardo and Pearce 1986; Pearce and Moscardo 1985, 1986; Redfoot 1984; Salamone 1997; Selwyn, 1996a, Shenhav-Keller 1993; Silver 1993; Turner and Manning 1988; Wang 1997a). However, with the concept of authenticity being widely used, its ambiguity and limitations have been increasingly exposed. Critics question its usefulness and validity because many tourist motivations or experiences cannot be explained in terms of the conventional concept of authenticity. Phenomena such as visiting friends and relatives, beach holidays, ocean cruising, nature tourism, visiting Disneyland, personal

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hobbies such as shopping, fishing, hunting, or sports, and so on, have nothing to do with authenticity in MacCannell's sense (Schudson 1979; Stephen 1990; Urry 1990). According to Urry, "the 'search for authenticity' is too simple a foundation for explaining contemporary tourism." (1991:51). But still authenticity is relevant to some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism, which involve the representation of the Other or of the past. However, if the concept is of limited applicability, then how can it be of central importance in tourism studies? Can one continue to use it while ignoring the difficulties relating to it, discard it altogether, or alternatively, redefine its meaning in order to justify and enhance its explanatory power?

This paper concentrates on the third choice: rethinking the meanings of authenticity in terms of existential philosophers' usage of the idea. While the two conventional meanings in the literature (namely, objective and constructive authenticity) are discussed, its third usage (existential authenticity) will be suggested as an alternative. This paper has two aims. First, the three different approaches—objectivism, constructivism, and postmodernism—are reviewed and analyzed. As a result, three different types of authenticity (objective authenticity, constructive or symbolic authenticity, and existential authenticity) will be clarified. Second, the paper will suggest that, in postmodern conditions, both objective and constructive authenticity, as object-related notions, can only explain a limited range of tourist experiences, whereas existential authenticity, as activity-related situation, is germane to the explanation of a greater variety of tourist experiences. Existential authenticity is further classified into two different dimensions: intra-personal and inter-personal authenticity.

### AUTHENTICITY IN TOURISM EXPERIENCE

Authenticity is a term grown ambiguous from varied usages and contexts (Golomb 1995:7). According to Trilling, the original usage was in the museum,

where persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given (1972:93).

This term was also borrowed to refer to human existence and "the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existence" (Trilling 1972:93). For example, Rousseau used the word authenticity to refer to the existential condition of being, and he regarded society as the major cause that destroyed it.

However, it is mainly its museum-linked usage which has been extended to tourism. For example, products of tourism such as works of art, festivals, rituals, cuisine, dress, housing, and so on are usually described as "authentic" or "inauthentic" in terms of the criterion of whether they are made or enacted "by local people according to custom or tradition". [And in this sense], "authenticity connotes traditional culture and origin, a sense of the genuine, the real or the

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