

# Tourism Commercialization and Perceived Authenticity

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The concept of authenticity is closely related to heritage tourism, especially cultural heritage tourism. Seeking authenticity is one of the main trends in heritage tourism because people want to identify and understand themselves or reminisce about the past by looking back to the old ways of life and cultural traditions. Compared with actual authenticity, perceived authenticity has more value. It is a bridge between heritage authenticity and tourist experience. Heritage tourism is essentially a form of tourism that attracts tourists based on the commercialization of historical and cultural assets. A heritage site not only draws tourists to experience the authentic past, but it also provides them with a place for entertainment, relaxation and consumption. That is, heritage tourism development inevitably encounters commercialization. From a demand perspective, heritage tourism is an emotional experience, the perception of tourists at its core.

tourism commercialization

perceived authenticity

tourist satisfaction

tourist loyalty

cultural heritage tourism

## 1. Tourism Authenticity

MacCannell <sup>[1]</sup> proposed the concept of ‘staged authenticity’ and introduced it into tourist motivation and experience research, after which authenticity became a hot topic in tourism research. However, as MacCannell <sup>[1][2]</sup> did not give a clear definition of authenticity, this caused various meanings and types of authenticity to emerge, such as staged and true authenticity <sup>[1]</sup>, symbolic authenticity <sup>[3]</sup>, constructive authenticity <sup>[4][5]</sup>, emergent authenticity <sup>[4]</sup>, hot and cold authenticity <sup>[6]</sup>, hyper-reality <sup>[7]</sup>, existential authenticity <sup>[8][9][10]</sup>, indexical and iconic authenticity <sup>[11]</sup>, customized authenticity <sup>[12]</sup>, etc. In fact, tourism authenticity is a multifaceted concept that leads to the need for multiple perspectives to coexist in its study <sup>[13]</sup>. Epistemologically, however, these authenticities can be classified into objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, existential authenticity and postmodern authenticity <sup>[14][9]</sup>. Additionally, current empirical studies show that they can be perceived by tourists during their travels (e.g., <sup>[15][16][17]</sup>).

Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of originals <sup>[9]</sup> or that which is recognized by authority <sup>[18]</sup>. Constructive authenticity refers to the tourists’ projection of the authenticity of toured objects <sup>[9]</sup>. Existential authenticity refers to the potential state of being activated by tourist activities <sup>[9]</sup>. Postmodern authenticity has nothing to do with toured objects being authentic or inauthentic because in many cases toured objects are contrived attractions that are imagined, fantasized or simulated without original references <sup>[9]</sup>. In a cultural heritage

tourism destination, objective authenticity often corresponds to the core attractions that have survived from the past, constructive authenticity means that the heritage site can be changed and reconstructed, existential authenticity is activity related or environment induced and postmodern authenticity refers to the objects that are simulated, imitated and even created. The four authenticities basically cover all objects and activities from premodern to modern and postmodern in cultural heritage sites.

In the past decade, the study of tourism authenticity has moved from conceptual elaboration and qualitative research to advanced empirical research. After Kolar and Zabkar [19] constructed an authenticity-centred model to explore the relationships between cultural motivation, object-based (i.e., object-related) and existential authenticity and loyalty, many studies borrowed and/or developed this theoretical model in the cultural heritage context (e.g., [15][16][20][21][22][17][23][24]). Among them, the positive relationship between objective, constructive and existential authenticity and tourist loyalty has indeed been verified [16][20][21][22][17]. Meanwhile, many other studies have also confirmed that objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity, respectively, have a positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism (e.g., [16][25]).

Although the direct relationship between postmodern authenticity and tourist satisfaction and loyalty has not been tested, Xie's [26] research shows that tourists can have a satisfactory experience from the Li people's bamboo-beating dance performance. The Aboriginal dance is a simulation and reproduction of past rituals [26], which belongs to postmodern authenticity. This suggests that postmodern authenticity has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction. Meanwhile, Yi, Fu, Yu and Jiang's [17] research on heritage villages found that postmodern authenticity has a significant positive conditional indirect effect on the relationship between objective authenticity and tourist loyalty through existential authenticity. Souvenirs have postmodern authenticity; Fu, Liu, Wang and Chao [24] found that souvenirs' authenticity has a significant positive impact on tourist loyalty. Thereby, postmodern authenticity is likely to have a positive impact on tourist loyalty in a cultural heritage context.

## 2. Tourism Commercialization

Commercialization is defined as a commercial relationship established around tourism products and activities [27], while commodification is defined as a process by which things or activities are transformed into commodities or services based on their exchange-value for trade [4]. The distinction between them lies in whether the product or activity is controlled by the producer [27]. When there is no direct monetary exchange between the producer and tourists, there is only commercialization instead of commodification. Commodification is a special process of commercialization in which 'all commodities are commercialized, but not all commercial activities are commodified' [27]; thus, commercialization is more universal. In fact, commercialization is often used rather than commodification in the Chinese context (e.g., [28][29][30]).

For cultural heritage tourist destinations, tourism commercialization is a special commercial phenomenon which has the following characteristics: first, the transformation of the destination's commercial function is mainly driven by tourism development rather than production and life, which is reflected in the fact that the commodity supply capacity of shops exceeds the actual purchase demand of local residents, their target customer groups being

mainly tourists rather than local residents, and these types of tourism shops account for a large proportion, even more than life shops; second, the tourism products of the destination are seriously homogenized, traditional handicrafts are reduced and products produced by modern technology flood the local tourism market [28]. Additionally, tourism commercialization is also reflected in the aggravated commercial atmosphere, the increased exotic business culture, the diminished local life vitality with the emigration of Aboriginal people, the construction of commercial buildings, etc. [31]. The level of these characteristics reflects the extent of tourism commercialization, from lower commercialization to higher commercialization, to over commercialization. What is important is that the commercial presentation of authenticity should not exceed the threshold of tourists' tolerance for inauthenticity, which mainly depends on the level of tourists' knowledge about specific aspects [32].

All tourism forms encounter commercialization due to the fact that tourism and culture are sold as commodities to tourists [33][34]. There are two views in academia about the effect of commercialization on destination and tourist experiences. One view is that tourism commercialization has only negative effects: that it destroys local authenticity [2][35], reduces tourists' perceived authenticity [36], damages the sustainable development of destinations and negatively affects tourists' satisfaction and future behaviour [37][38].

Another view is that tourism commercialization is not always toxic (Zhou et al., 2013). This view not only accepts that tourism commercialization may lead to an increase in the number of migrants and the feeling of crowding at destinations, damaging the local environment, harming the sense of place, reducing the attractiveness of tourist attractions, affecting the daily life of local people and weakening their socioeconomic status and even causing the disappearance of the original meanings of traditional beliefs, cultures and customs [29][39], but it also holds that tourism commercialization can promote local economic development, create employment opportunities, increase local people's and government's financial revenue, present a positive local image, improve the survival and protection of traditional culture and folk customs, strengthen local people's sense of identity and cultural protection consciousness [29][39], reconstruct and even enhance local authenticity [40][4], enrich destination attractions and promote tourists' perception of destination authenticity [41]. This research mainly examines the impact of commercialization on tourists' perception of authenticity.

Tourism commercialization creates opportunities for tourists to experience an authentic destination culture [26][42]. Zhou, Zhang and Edelheim's [20] research on the Chinese calligraphy landscape indicates that tourists can still obtain a higher perception of objective authenticity and existential authenticity in a commercialized context. Xie's [26] research on the Li dance suggests that commercialization helps tourists experience the authenticity of cultural heritage. The dance has postmodern authenticity [26] and existential authenticity [9]. In addition, the process of commercialization forms constructive authenticity and can be perceived by tourists [40][4][36]. These indicate that tourism commercialization may positively impact tourists' perception of objective, constructive, existential and postmodern authenticity. Of course, these inferences need to be tested by this research.

### 3. Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty

Satisfaction is the overall evaluation by consumers of their own consumption experience [43]. Tourist satisfaction comes from customer satisfaction in the field of marketing, which is usually defined as the comparative result of

tourist pretour expectations and post-tour experiences [44][45]. The expectation-disconfirmation model is the most commonly used method for evaluating tourist satisfaction [46][47]. It shows that tourists compare the actual performance of the current destination with their pretour expectations. In addition to this approach, the perceived performance model, equity theory and norm theory are also used for tourist satisfaction evaluation [48]. The perceived performance model only considers tourists' actual experiences at the destination and does not consider their pretour expectations, the equity theory compares tourists' benefits and costs (including time, money and energy), and the norm theory compares tourists' experience differences between the current destination and other destinations visited in the past. The integrated method is more effective for evaluating tourist satisfaction because tourists may have different travel motivations and satisfaction standards [48].

Loyalty is the most direct monitor to predict the future behaviour of tourists to a certain destination. Tourist loyalty is usually defined and measured in recommendation intention and revisiting intention [19][23][49]. However, with the widespread use of smartphone apps, sharing travel experiences through social media helps to improve overall post-tourism evaluation [50]. Thus, the measurement of tourist loyalty should add a dimension of sharing intention.

In the literature, tourist loyalty is mostly presented as a consequence, and its antecedents are usually tourist motivation, perceived value, experience quality, perceived authenticity, destination image, place attachment and tourist satisfaction [15][16][22][43][51]. Tourist satisfaction is often used as a mediator between tourist loyalty and other antecedents [43]. The positive relationship between tourist satisfaction and loyalty has been supported by several studies (e.g., [16][43][48][51]).

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