



Wilderness state of mind: Expanding authenticity

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the overuse of existential authenticity as a categorical umbrella encapsulating touristic experience and contributes new insights to the way postmodern authenticity is defined in tourism research. To date, studies associated with postmodern authenticity have focused on the inauthentic and themed, with scholars contending that it speaks more to the consumptive, the superficial, and the trivial than to the substantive and meaningful. By working through a case study focused on nature tourists in pursuit of authentic wilderness experiences, this paper illustrates the ways postmodern authenticity encompasses much more than cynical authenticity, for while the American wilderness may be a hyperreal, and even hypernatural, simulacrum, nature tourists nevertheless report deep, meaningful, and “authentic” engagements with wilderness.

Introduction

“To me, I think wilderness is in large part a state of mind...you can find wilderness in surprising places” (Jeremy, 27 year-old nature tourist)

The concept of existential authenticity has gained considerable ground within tourism studies to the point that over a decade ago Steiner and Reisinger (2006) proclaimed that all other forms of authenticity should be discarded in favor of existential authenticity. In the intervening decade, existential authenticity has been widely accepted within tourism studies and an increasing number of facets of touristic experience have been encompassed under this concept. Of late, however, tourism scholars have begun to question existentialism as a basis for conceptualizing authenticity within tourism and to challenge its overuse as a categorical umbrella employed to encapsulate all aspects of touristic experience (see Shepherd, 2015; Knudsen, Rickly, & Vidon, 2016; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). In this paper we argue that the introduction of psychoanalytical authenticity, or authenticity as a fantasy (Knudsen et al., 2016), must also be brought to bear on tourism research in two ways. First, it leads to a reconsideration of Wang’s (1999) four categories of authenticity (objective, constructive, postmodern, and existential). Second, psychoanalytical authenticity also attends to the shortcomings of the current theorization of postmodern authenticity in tourism research. To date, studies associated with postmodern authenticity have employed a cynical tone by focusing on the conspicuously inauthentic and the themed, with scholars contending that it speaks more to the consumptive, the superficial, and the trivial than to the substantive and meaningful. Studies tend to present theme parks, virtual and augmented realities, and shopping malls as exemplars, with tourists motivated by consumption, frivolity, and image (see Brown, 1996; Bruner, 1994; Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010; Fjellman, 1992; Guttentag, 2010; Hollinshead, 1998; Wang, 1999; Mintz, 2004; Pretes, 1995). Arguably, this trajectory might have much to do with Wang’s (1999)

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sizing up of postmodern authenticity as a perspective that “buries” and “abandons” the meaning-making and experiential qualities of authenticity. In response, we seek to investigate, through extending postmodern authenticity to include psychoanalytical authenticity, an experiential phenomenon of tourism: on tour one gets the feeling of authenticity despite an absence of its absolute existence. Importantly, psychoanalytical authenticity facilitates a more nuanced and more precise attention to authenticity that allows for its conscious and its unconscious elements, the expressible and the inexpressible (Vidon, 2017). We use the term “psychoanalytical authenticity” in this paper to denote the split nature of authenticity – that is to say its conscious and unconscious aspects and the ways of those both can and cannot be experienced, embodied, and expressed.

By working through a case study focused on nature tourists in pursuit of authentic wilderness experiences, this paper draws out new insights on postmodern authenticity. We suggest that there is a more visceral driver of postmodern authenticity in tourism, the *seductive* power of the fantastical, which takes place well beyond hyperreality and simulacra. Indeed, the fantasy of authenticity is seductive in even the most “pristine” environments, with wilderness being exemplary. Further, while Wang (1999) suggests postmodern authenticity in tourism studies paved the way for a conceptualization of existential authenticity in the field, it is important to recognize the way the development of these philosophical perspectives actually evolved in the reverse order. Existentialism *preceded* postmodernism. This historical lineage has important implications for the application of these perspectives to authenticity research in tourism studies. Namely, it supports arguments that existential authenticity has been over-extended as a conceptual framework for understanding touristic experience, and in doing so, *revives* the often overlooked postmodern perspective of authenticity as accounting for much more than the continuation of the *inauthentic* but also reveals the power of fantasy as seductive for the psychological incongruences of experiencing authenticity.

In defense of postmodern authenticity

By articulating the object-oriented nature of objective, constructive, and postmodern authenticities, Wang (1999) does not acknowledge the psychological implications of postmodern authenticity that come with the acceptance of the inauthentic (false, fake, replica, etc.) and the active pursuit of the hyperreal, fantastical, and virtual despite tourists’ knowing its *inauthenticity*. Rather, postmodern authenticity has become a catchall category for the undiscerning ways in which the inauthentic persists in tourism, and is typified by what we have come to term “cynical authenticity”. However, we argue that this postmodern authenticity involves a type of “enlightened false consciousness” (Sloterdijk, 1988), typified in Žižek’s words (1989, p. 23) as “we know what we do, but we do it all the same.” That is to say, tourists may well be aware of the inauthenticity of a site or attraction, but they participate as if it were authentic or holds the potential for their own authenticity. When we consider the psychological incongruences of postmodern authenticity we are able to more directly attend to its motivational dimensions. This attention to motivation allows us to move this conceptual framework forward in tourism research to account for more than cynical interpretations. In fact, it allows us to delve deeper into both the conscious and the unconscious, that is, into the psychoanalytical realm to discover what drives us toward the inauthentic.

Further, while Wang (1999, p. 358) states, “a postmodernist deconstruction of the authenticity of the original implicitly paves the way to define existential authenticity as an alternative experience in tourism”, he is underestimating a more powerful underlying relationship of existentialism predating postmodernism. In particular, existentialism’s questioning of the nature of experience and the self was crucial to further critiquing the overarching narratives of modernity. It inspired a revival in psychological inquiry and questioning of reality. From this, postmodernity has come to be recognized as a theoretical shift toward the acknowledgement of multiple truths and multiple identities, as well as towards attention to hyperreality and simulacra. The postmodern era may have sped the deconstruction of the idea of the original, but the inspiration for such a shift has come from seeds sown much earlier in existentialism itself. As such, the burgeoning interest in existential authenticity as a means to encapsulate any investigation of touristic experience has over-reached its ability to adequately elucidate the dynamics of touristic motivation and experience. Of course, there remains utility in using existential authenticity to conceptualize touristic Being based on self-making, embodiment, and social relations, but it cannot fully account for the phenomenon of tourists’ describing the feeling of authenticity while also recognizing an absence of its absolute existence. Rather, this potential rests within postmodern authenticity that incorporates not only cynical interpretations but also psychoanalytical.

A psychoanalytical approach facilitates an understanding of why claims of authenticity “beckon” us – the lack created by and inherent in our subjectivity creates a desire to be made whole. And while the object of that desire is desire itself (Bailly, 2009; Lacan, 1959), authenticity serves a critical role as the mechanism through which it is expressed and experienced in material form (Kingsbury, 2010; Knudsen et al., 2016; Vidon, 2017; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). The ways in which our subjectivity is “split” in late capitalism has been theorized since the time of Marx (1995), who first identified modernity (and postmodernity) as alienating us from what we produce, from fellow humans, from Nature and, ultimately from ourselves. Further, objective, constructed, existential and postmodern authenticity name the ways in which we attempt to consciously overcome the foundational renting of ourselves as subjects. In fact, it has been suggested that these categories are interrelated in most touristic experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2012).

Lacan ([1966] 2006) contended that rather than a consequence of capitalism or modernity, alienation *constitutes* the subject, resulting in split subjectivity. The process however, leaves us with feelings of “lack”, feelings that we need to be made whole again, as we are split, separated from the purely biological part of ourselves during the all-important process of alienation (Lacan, [1966] 2006, [1986] 1992). While Lacan ([1966] 2006) maintained that we can never be made whole, that our alienated condition is not meant to be nor can it be resolved, we nevertheless continue to seek things we believe will fill this “lack” and make us feel whole (Bailly, 2009; Kingsbury, 2010; Knudsen et al., 2016; Vidon, 2017; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Authenticity is an important target for the split subject seeking to assuage feelings of lack.

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