



Is all authenticity accepted by tourists and residents? The concept, dimensions and formation mechanism of negative authenticity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Negative authenticity relates to authentic phenomena and elements inappropriate for publicly exhibit at destinations.
- Negative authenticity phenomena are opposed both by tourists and residents.
- This article establishes the concept of negative authenticity through empirical evidence, and validates its dimensions.
- The values of modern civilization play a key role in the formation mechanism of negative authenticity.
- Authenticity construction is not a neutral procedure and has value orientation toward modern mainstream values.

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ABSTRACT

It is nearly always implicitly assumed that authenticity is a positive trait, as opposed to the fake or the plastic. As opposed to allegedly positive authenticity, negative authenticity is something that is authentic but which tourists and residents consider not valuable enough to be preserved. However, researchers rarely pay attention to it, and there remains a lack of theoretical recognition and in-depth understanding of it. Using the case of China's ancient towns of Zhouzhuang and Tongli, this article aims to empirically verify negative authenticity and validate its dimensions on the consensus of tourists and residents through a mixed-method design. Based on interviews, this paper further analyzed the formation mechanism of negative authenticity. We found that the values of modern civilisation play a key role in the constructive process of negative authenticity. The findings further clarify the position of negative authenticity in the theoretical system and indicate its application value.

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1. Introduction

The study of authenticity has gained extensive attention over the past few decades in the field of tourism. Authenticity is not only relevant to tourists' motivations (Chhabra, 2005) but also has a significant impact on tourists' satisfaction and even the perceived image and sense of place of a destination (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Engeset & Elvekrok, 2015; Ramkisson, 2015; Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016). Authenticity is also closely related to the daily life of local residents and their survival and development. It is an

important academic topic that is closely related to the evolution and development of a tourism destination (Cole, 2007). Studies have often focused on the philosophical concepts of authenticity, different types of authenticity (such as objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity) and the modes of authentication of attraction, including cool authentication and hot authentication (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988; Ryan, 1997, 2003; Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Lau, 2010; Xie, 2011; Chhabra, 2012; Cohen & Cohen, 2012, etc.). However, we often ignore negative authenticity, which is also inextricably linked to the existing theoretical system of authenticity.

It is nearly always implicitly assumed that "authenticity is a positive trait, as opposed to the fake or the plastic" (Martin, 2010, p. 551). As opposed to allegedly positive authenticity, negative authenticity is something that is authentic but which tourists think

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is not valuable enough to be preserved (Martin, 2010). In early studies, the notion of negative authenticity was only sporadically mentioned. As McKercher, Cros, and McKercher (2002) noted in their study of folk tourism, although tourists want to know the reality of the destination and have an authentic experience, they are unwilling to face the entire reality of their host society. For example, visitors will not spend a large sum of money to watch poor children in remote areas suffering from disease for which there is no money for treatment (Bruner, 1991). In the study of the authenticity of Lincoln House, Bruner (1994) found that the true situation of Lincoln House (New Salem) in the 1830s was messy, full of dirt, crowded, full of conflict and full of hustle and bustle. When tourists visit in the 1990s, New Salem is clean and harmonious, and it has been renovated. However, no one questioned the authenticity of Lincoln House in the 1990s. In an ethnographic study of behind-the-scenes debates surrounding a tourist event in Papua New Guinea, Martin (2010) first proposed the concept of negative authenticity. Combining the previous studies, we generalise that negative authenticity is something that is authentic but not valuable enough to be preserved. Negative authenticity refers to phenomena and elements of a tourist destination's origin and past that are not accepted by tourists, although these elements and phenomena either currently exist or existed in the destination's past.

Indeed, such negative authenticity phenomena are opposed both by tourists and local residents. For example, "some genocide memorials in Rwanda have retained unburied bones and display blood-stained stones, arguably the most authentic possible reminder" (Cohen, 2011, p. 196). These unburied bones and blood-stained stones are the most concrete and real legacy of disaster, however, schoolchildren and foreign tourists have not been attracted to this place, instead visiting Kigali's Genocide Memorial which doesn't retain unburied bones or blood-stained stone. Another example of this phenomenon is residents' negative attitude towards the custom of open-air, naked bathing in Sanmenxia, which is located in Henan Province, China. Local villagers generally complain that tourists' watching is an invasion of their privacy. Young girls in the locality are especially conflicted by the custom, which has been handed down through the generations. They even deny the authenticity of the open-air, naked bath culture.

Negative authenticity is not an accidental, isolated phenomenon. However, we seldom pay attention to it, and there remains a lack of theoretical recognition and in-depth understanding of it. The research objectives of this paper mainly include three aspects: (a) to establish the concept of negative authenticity through empirical evidence, and validate the dimensions of negative authenticity on the consensus between tourists and residents, (b) to explore how the negative authenticity is formed, that is to say, to explore the formation mechanism of negative authenticity and (c) to clarify the position of negative authenticity in the theoretical system of authenticity and indicate its application value.

2. Theoretical backgrounds

2.1. Negative authenticity: a constructivist perspective

The term authenticity derived from a Greek word meaning "made by oneself" and "original". The concept of authenticity was originally used to describe the museum's art exhibits (Trilling, 1972). In 1973, MacCannell introduced the concept of authenticity in the context of "the authenticity of the stage" (staged authenticity) to the study of travel motives and tourism experience. Authenticity has become one of the core concepts of the theoretical interpretation of tourism attraction, and has aroused heated discussions and analyses (Taylor, 2001).

"Objectivism approach of authenticity is mainly based on the

museum orientation of objects examined by an expert to determine their true nature (Leite & Graburn, 2009)" (Zhu, 2012, p. 1496). Objectivists believe that authenticity is determined by an external objective criterion that implies all that is genuine, unadulterated, without hypocrisy, honest and real (Relph, 1976). The concept of authenticity in objectivism, whether it is the "pseudo-event" criticised by Boorstin or the "staged authenticity" proposed by MacCannell, has measurement standards in the museum context of judgments, emphasising the cognitive experience of the authenticity of the original work. The objectivist's claim has provoked many questions and criticisms. Critics believe that objectivism is a judgment from the etic perspective. As Zhu (2012) pointed out "to view authenticity from the etic perspective as the original object seems to be too simplistic to capture its true complexity. It is not a static collection in museums preserved by experts; in fact, it is experienced by mass tourists from an emic view" (p. 1497).

Evidently, "the constructionist perspective of authenticity is informed by a cultural constructionist epistemology. Cultural constructionism asserts that knowledge and reality are products of their cultural context" (Mkono, 2012, p. 388). The most important point that differentiates constructivist authenticity from objectivist authenticity is that the research standpoint shifts from the object's attribute to the subject's feeling, that is, from the objective standard of the object to the subjective perception and judgment of the subject. The so-called "authenticity" pursued by tourists is not necessarily an objective fact. When tourists experience the objects, they often experience only symbols of authenticity (Culler, 2007). Constructivists consider authenticity a symbolic, dynamic and constantly constructive process that emphasises the differences in authentic perceptions of various subjects (Cohen, 1988). As Wang (1999) and Rickly-Boyd (2012) described, constructive authenticity is object oriented and applies objective authenticity from a constructivist perspective. The criteria of authenticity are not entirely based on objective reality but mainly on the basis of subjective perception.

Bruner (1994) pointed out, it is impossible to make a historic reproduction accurate in every regard, especially with limited knowledge and resources. The perception of tourists is inevitably influenced by their preferences, beliefs and knowledge and by the power of external media, and it is impossible to produce the subjective judgment which is consistent with the object's attribute (Wang & Wu, 2012). Even residents who have lived in an area for many years cannot strictly and accurately produce subjective judgments that coincide with the object's attributes. The perception of many elderly residents also adds to the judgments of many individual factors, such as memory, vision, etc. (Lu, 2007).

Therefore, authenticity is diverse and flexible; it is no more than the result of human interpretation and construction (Wang, 1999). Martin (2010) considered that the so-called original object is also determined through selection; "the 'original' that is present is always of course itself a product of the present; carefully constructed through the selective remembrance and forgetting of elements of the past" (p. 550). Kelner (2001) also noted "selective perception and oversimplification are inherent to all conceptualisations of authenticity" (p. 9).

Previous studies have often paid attention to the selective forgetting and memory caused by cognitive factors, including memory ability, knowledge, vision, etc. But these studies neglect the selective forgetting and memory caused by the subjective attitude, i.e. whether the subject accept the phenomena and elements which really exist or existed in the tourism destination. The true but unacceptable part of the destination is called negative authenticity. Therefore, negative authenticity is also rooted in the selection process. Negative authenticity relates to whether authentic phenomena and elements can be accepted by tourists

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