Authentication in sports tourism

Matthew Lamont *

Southern Cross University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Social processes ascribing authenticity to touristic phenomena is an area of tourism theory lacking empirical insights. This paper addresses the French Alps as a historically significant landscape for the Tour de France and presents an empirical exploration of Cohen and Cohen's (2012) theoretical framework of authentication in tourism. Using the context of a commercially organized tour, social practices of sports tourists which reinforced and amplified the status of the French Alps as authentic "Tour space" are analyzed. Embodied cycling excursions combined with collective, participatory roadside practices constituted performative acts of authentication, whilst mediation of encounters with places of sporting significance highlighted authentication as a cyclical process.

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Introduction and background

Authenticity is a contentious, yet attractive, analytical concept in tourism research. Its main utility is in understanding tourists' motivations and experiences (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). However, Cohen and Cohen (2012) argue that discussions of authenticity, "... failed to lead to a broad consensus, which would make authenticity the anchor of a general paradigm for the study of modern tourism" (p. 1295). They maintain that social processes through which tourism attractions are authenticated have attracted little scholarly attention. Yet, Cohen and Cohen emphasize the importance of understanding how these processes facilitate construction of objective and existential authenticity and have proposed a theoretical framework for understanding authentication processes in tourism.

Sports tourism scholars have advocated the deployment of concepts surrounding authenticity to enhance understanding of sports tourists' experiences (e.g., Hinch & Higham, 2011; Weed, 2006). Authenticity in sports tourism is a fledgling area of research and the subject of authentication in this

* Corresponding author. Address: PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW 2480, Australia. Tel.: +61 2 6626 9428; fax: +61 2 6626 9155.
E-mail address: matthew.lamont@scu.edu.au

field is uncharted territory. This paper presents a case study of sports tourists visiting a global mega-event, the Tour de France. The French Alps were introduced into the race route eight years after the inaugural Tour. They are culturally iconic in Tour de France folklore and pose a hostile environment for the event's competitors. Yet, there is little research around how the French Alps have attained their social status as an authentic "place" of the Tour de France. This research adopts an ethnographic methodology and has one broad aim: to empirically explore manifestations of Cohen and Cohen's (2012) theoretical framework of authentication in the context of a commercially organized tour to the Tour de France, with particular reference to the French Alps.

Literature review

Authenticity and authentication in tourism studies

According to Steiner and Reisinger (2006), "Authenticity is a familiar word but not a very stable concept, especially within tourism literature. Its meaning tends to be a muddled amalgam of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual concepts" (p. 299). Conceptualizing authenticity is problematic because of the two senses in which it has been applied. First, whether toured objects are "real" or "fake." The second being an existential sense, centering on tourists' temporary experiences of authentic self (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Given this paper's focus on authentication processes, tracing the evolution of authenticity in tourism is beyond its scope; its evolution has been traced from the works of Boorstin (1964) and MacCannell (1976) by others (e.g., Olsen, 2002; Reisinger & Steiner, 2005; Wang, 1999; Zhu, 2012).

Wang (1999) builds upon Cohen's (1988) argument that objective authenticity limits understandings of tourists' experiences. For Wang, authenticity may be divided into objective and subjective, concerned with authenticity of toured objects and authenticity of the self, respectively. From this dichotomy Wang proposes three categories: objective, constructive, and existential. Objective authenticity relates to the genuineness of objects, with authentic experiences invoked through recognition of toured object(s) as real. Constructive authenticity encompasses social constructions of authenticity projected onto toured objects, of which those subjectivities are shaped by individuals' "particular contextual situation or intersubjective setting" (Wang, 1999, p. 354).

Existential authenticity broadens the analytical scope of authenticity as a perspective for understanding tourists' motivations and experiences. This conceptualization of authenticity goes beyond the genuineness of toured objects in understanding tourists' quests to experience their authentic selves through liminal tourism settings (Kim & Jamal, 2007). As Steiner and Reisinger (2006) point out, existential authenticity stems from philosophical traditions surrounding human interpretations of happiness and self. Various scholars have drawn upon the work of philosophers including Heidegger (Brown, 2013; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), Sartre (Brown, 2013), and Benjamin (Rickly-Boyd, 2012a), in exploring existential authenticity as it applies to tourism. In particular, Heidegger's (1962) concept of *Dasein* has been favored, broadly concerned with human existence in the external world and confrontation of emergent possibilities (Rickly-Boyd, 2012a; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

Empirical studies have supported the usefulness of existential authenticity in tourism studies. Kim and Jamal (2007) show how tourists experience feelings of existential authenticity at a renaissance festival in Texas. They affirm that liminality of tourists' experiences was important in experiencing existential authenticity. Relaxation of social norms liberated participants in projecting their authentic selves through intrapersonal and interpersonal processes (Wang, 1999). Intrapersonal processes include bodily feelings (e.g., sexual encounters and alcohol consumption) and self-making (e.g., temporary self-transformation via playfulness and period costuming). From an interpersonal perspective, Kim and Jamal observe the development of touristic communitas in which social and occupational status dissolved. Communitas assisted the participants to interact on a socially equal basis, through which camaraderie and acceptance resulted.

Similarly, Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher (2010) explore triggers of existential authenticity for tourists visiting *Lord of the Rings* film sites in New Zealand. They observed that "fellowship" (p. 245) within the tour group, physical embodiment of film sets, personal emotional connections with the *Lord of the*