



Does authenticity really affect behavior? The case of the Strasbourg Christmas Market

Herbert Castéran*, Claire Roederer¹

University of Strasbourg, EM Strasbourg, 61 Avenue de la Forêt-Noire, 67085 Strasbourg Cedex, France

HIGHLIGHTS

- The perceived authenticity has an impact on tourist behavior.
- Its monetary value is measured in the case of the Strasbourg Christmas Market.
- The more loyal to its origins the market, the more loyal the visitors.
- Authenticity represents a measurable financial asset for sites.

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ABSTRACT

The study of tourism has made authenticity a central issue. Based on the case of the Strasbourg Christmas Market, a successful annual tourist event, this research combines qualitative and quantitative data to analyze how the perception of authenticity is constructed and how authenticity can explain behavior. The dimensions of authenticity of a tourist site (Camus, 2010), namely originality, in the sense that the market is seen as 'an original', and a lack of artificial components, clearly explain differences in visiting frequency in the case of the Strasbourg Christmas Market. In addition, based on our data, we assess the financial value of authenticity and show that authenticity, a concept whose value is sometimes intensely questioned, can indeed be operationalized.

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1. Introduction

Can authenticity really affect the frequency of visits to a tourist site? In December 2010, a regional newspaper presenting the 2010 Strasbourg Christmas Market clearly raised this issue, thus reflecting the growing sensitivity of consumers to the question of authenticity. Authenticity as a construct is also receiving a great deal of attention from consumer researchers at this time.

Strasbourg features the oldest Christmas market in France; it first took place in 1570 and today is the largest Christmas market in France. The Strasbourg Christmas Market is not unique; in the Alsace region, Christmas markets have also proliferated in recent years. However, Strasbourg remains the largest and the oldest in the area. "Christ-kindelsmärik", as the market is called in the Alsatian language, takes over the city's historic district every year from December to early

January and constitutes an important event for the citizens of Strasbourg and for numerous tourists from France and all over the world.

However, the market has also generated passionate debates centered on the question of its authenticity. The authenticity issue has been noted spontaneously by visitors, and stakeholders have eagerly commented on the same question. Each year, any change in the visitor numbers at the market are claimed to be linked to the authenticity issue, and some journalists have suggested courses of action that the market organizers might pursue to achieve greater authenticity. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of how perceptions of authenticity affect consumer behavior has yet to be established.

Authenticity can be defined as a concept that encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true. That being said there exist different conceptualizations of authenticity and ways of operationalizing those ideas (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Peterson, 2005; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Recent contributions have tended to address these criticisms by providing new insights. For instance, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) establish how consumers' personal goals influence how they perceive authenticity. Chhabra (2010) explores how consumer age and life experience affect perceptions of authenticity. Although authenticity can be a concern

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 3 68 85 88 73.

E-mail addresses: herbert.casteran@em-strasbourg.eu (H. Castéran), claire.roederer@em-strasbourg.eu (C. Roederer).

¹ Tel.: +33 3 68 85 83 93.

with any type of product, authenticity is particularly central in tourism (Getz, 2008). Even if some tourists expect to be entertained regardless of the authenticity of a tourist site (Cohen, 1979; Urry, 1990), authenticity matters to most visitors. In this context, Kolar and Zabkar (2010) measure how the perceived authenticity of tourist sites affects visitors' attitudinal loyalty.

To our knowledge, however, the impact of perceived authenticity on behavior has not yet been studied. In line with Kolar and Zabkar (2010), we propose to measure this impact and assess the value of authenticity. This approach can help make it possible to operationalize the concept of authenticity while at simultaneously improving how it is conceptualized.

This article combines an interpretative approach with Camus's (2010) scale for measuring the authenticity of tourist sites to establish: (1) how visitors to the Strasbourg Christmas Market (hereafter referred to as the SChM) perceive its authenticity; (2) how this perception can be related to past and present visiting patterns; (3) how this perception can affect visitors' future loyalty to this annual event; and (4) how the value of authenticity can be assessed based on visit recency and frequency.

SChM thus provides a rich context in which to address research questions that are relevant from both theoretical and managerial perspectives. The structure of this article is as follows. First, we provide a review of the literature on authenticity and event tourism. We then justify the choice of SChM as our field of study and outline the methods employed to address our research questions. Next, we present our findings. We identify the links between dimensions of authenticity (originality in the sense that the market

is seen as 'an original' and artificiality) and behavior based on qualitative and quantitative data. We thus operationalize authenticity that has, at times, been questioned as a construct (Lau, 2010; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). We show that authenticity does indeed matter and affects not only attitudinal loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) but actual behavior. We conclude the article with a discussion of our theoretical contributions, managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

Authenticity is a complex issue which has generated much literature in tourism studies. To structure our theoretical background and limit its boundaries, we have chosen to organize it as follows. After introducing the general topic of authenticity in tourist consumption, we identify landmarks in its conceptualization (Table 1). We then focus on two issues that serve our research objectives: authenticity as a perceptual process and the measure of authenticity of tourist sites.

2.1. Authenticity and consumption

The determinants of tourism should be validated and quantified using a consumer-based approach. Tourist events in particular have assumed increasing importance in the promotion of destinations (Getz, 2008). Tourist events have been defined as spatial–temporal phenomenon, unique because of the interactions that they create between setting, people and management system. They include

Table 1
Conceptualization of authenticity in tourism a few landmarks.

Main findings	Authors	Modernist approach	Constructivist approach	Postmodernist approach
		<i>Authenticity is an attribute of an object</i>	<i>Authenticity is a social construct and the result of a perceptual process of interpretation</i>	<i>Authenticity or inauthenticity are not relevant in tourism</i>
Authenticity as an 'objective' concept As an attribute of a tourist object? Object authenticity		Boorstin (1964) Tourists, as modern pilgrims in search of authenticity, have only access to "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973, 1976)		
Authenticity as a social construct + focus on the authentication process			(Hughes, 1995; Taylor, 2001) Indexical and iconic authenticity to feed (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) A process contingent on the consumer's goals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) Objective and constructivist opposed to existential authenticity derived from the experience	As a reproduction can be perceived as more real than the actual object, authenticity is not historical but visual, the result of a perceptual process, and not attached to an object (Eco, 1986)
Existential authenticity	Wang (1999)			
Suggestion to abandon the concept of authenticity and reconceptualize object "authenticity"	Reisinger and Steiner (2006)	Lau (2010)		
Genres of authenticity based on Gilmore and Pine (2007) typology		Andriotis (2011)		
Tourism as a secular ritual The concept of aura to link objective authenticity to authenticated tourist experience			Rickly-Boyd (2012)	

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