



Socio-spatial authenticity at co-created music festivals



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ABSTRACT

From the early days of hippie counter-culture, music festivals have been an important part of the British summer. Today they are commercialised offerings without the counter-cultural discourse of earlier times. Drawing on participant observation, interviews and focus groups conducted at a rock festival and a smaller boutique festival, the paper examines how their design, organisation and management are co-created with participants to produce authentic experiences. The paper contributes to research on authenticity in tourism by examining how authenticity emerges and is experienced in such co-created commercial settings. It presents the importance that the socio-spatial plays in authenticity experiences and how socio-spatial experience and engagement can also be recognised as a form of aura.

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Introduction

Contemporary music festivals, like the medieval festivals described by Kim and Jamal (2007, p. 184), provide experiential settings where “participants are free from the constraints of daily living and can behave in a way not governed by conventional social norms and regulations that structure everyday life”. This experiential opportunity to transcend normative constraints within a liminal setting is central to music festivals. They offer the opportunity to engage in an unfettered state of being often precluded in everyday life where arguably festival-goers have the opportunity to counter the “loss of “true self” in public roles” in modern Western society (Wang, 1999, p. 358). Despite music festivals having become a more commonplace part of life for many young people, they are nevertheless constituted as spaces apart from everyday life, where visitors can immerse themselves in extraordinary experiences away from such public roles (Morgan, 2007).

Various authors (Belhassen, Caton, & Steward, 2008; Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010; Lamont, 2014; Lamont, 2014; Rickly-Boyd, 2013) have shown the importance of place for tourists’ experiences of authenticity. The paper examines whether and how festival goers can be said to experience authenticity in two different temporary and constructed places. In particular we consider how participants interact in a socio-spatial sense with different commoditised tourist music events. Our contribution to the authenticity debate is to explore how authenticity emerges in such co-created places and to demonstrate the importance of different socio-spatial (Rickly-Boyd, 2013) experiences in creating authenticity which includes a sense of place and atmosphere captured by the term aura. The sense of aura is intersubjective and reciprocal between that

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experienced and the experienter. It is the tourist's interaction with the place and the experience which allows for an engagement with aura (Rickly-Boyd, 2013).

A short history of music festivals

The UK music festival can be traced back to the 1960s, and hippie counter culture (Anderton, 2011). Most were not commercial, offering an alternative to consumer society (Anderton, 2011; McKay, 1996) with bands playing for free, no entrance charges and little formal organisation (Hetherington, 1998). In recent years music festivals have evolved to become popular tourist destinations (Sawyer, 2011). They have assumed an important place in Britain's cultural landscape growing in size and number and becoming more mainstream (Stone, 2009). Britain is now internationally renowned for its summer programme of music festivals. This includes longstanding events like the Glastonbury, Isle of Wight and Cambridge folk festivals dating back to the 1960s/1970s, and the Reading Festival which evolved from the Beaulieu Jazz festivals held in the late 1950s (McKay, 2004).

In the last decade there has been unprecedented commercialisation and corporatisation of the music festival sector (Morey, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Szmigin, & Riley, 2014). The largest events are now controlled by a few major corporations most notably the transnational Live Nation which has come to dominate the sector (Stone, 2009). The emphasis on management and customer care has played a fundamental role in establishing music festivals within the tourism industry (Connell & Gibson, 2003). The paper explores two aspects of how the music festival experience is produced and consumed. Firstly, it examines festivals as sites of commodified freedom (Cheong & Miller, 2000), designed by festival organisers to resonate with a particular market segment (Prentice & Anderson, 2003). Secondly, the paper explores how festivals co-create the consumer's festival experience as an escape from the everyday where people are in a situation and/or place away from their daily lives, engaging in non-ordinary activities (Wang, 1999). The question of whether the commoditisation of such events makes them meaningless has been examined in tourism since Cohen's (1988) seminal paper but it is nevertheless one that is still important both in terms of how tourist events and locations are produced and how people experience them. As Cohen (1988) has noted, authenticity when considered as a constructed concept, can be emergent and develop over time; while Glastonbury is the proto-type British music festival, others have gained credentials for particular types of experience and may therefore be viewed as authentic manifestations. The paper examines two festivals which offer co-created, commoditised experiences, and considers how people authenticate themselves through their social-spatial experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2013).

The state of authenticity

Authenticity in tourism research has been described as a "slippery concept" (Belhassen et al., 2008, p. 669), although it might more appropriately be referred to as an essentially contested one (Gallie, 1964) given the heterogeneity of interpretations it has been subject to (Lamont, 2014; Mkono, 2013). Wang (1999, p. 353) is more positive, describing the debate as "not a matter of black or white, but rather involves a much wider spectrum, rich in ambiguous colors". As Cohen and Cohen (2012) note the discussions to date have failed to lead to a consensus but have rather resulted in a range of theoretical perspectives.

It is important therefore to outline the differences that constitute the authenticity debate in the tourist literature to frame the theoretical context and application of the current study. Wang (1999) presents four theoretical perspectives to authenticity; objectivism, constructivism, postmodernism and existentialism. Objective authenticity refers to the recognition of toured objects or events as genuine (MacCannell, 1973); in the music festival context objective authenticity might be equated with witnessing particular live acts, or attending prototypical events, like Glastonbury, Reading or the Isle of Wight festival or referring to the "original" music festival, Woodstock. The pursuit of "real" experiences as proposed by MacCannell (1973) has been extensively critiqued (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Olsen, 2002; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999;). Wang (1999, p. 353) rejects the objective turn in authenticity for its emphasis on the "experience of toured objects which are found to be objective" ignoring how tourists experience those objects, places or events.

Wang (1999) employs and critiques the constructivist approach where tourists subjectively ascribe authenticity to objects and events. In this paradigm tourists seek symbolic authenticity (Wang, 1999) which allows them to determine what is authentic; this is a more fluid, negotiable and contextual form of authenticity (Rickly-Boyd, 2012a), such that places can become authentic; Belhassen et al. (2008) use the examples of Disneyland and Graceland to illustrate the emergent nature of the constructivist approach as these places attain authenticity over time. Finally, the postmodern approach deconstructs authenticity and blurs distinctions between real and fake. Tourists are not seeking authenticity but looking for enjoyment. The postmodern is represented in Yu Wang's (2007) presentation of customised authenticity when she describes how Lijiang's Naxi homestay guesthouses present a constructed version of reality that tourists can readily embrace and enjoy.

Through concentrating on the individual, Wang (1999) moved the authenticity debate away from an object focus; people feel more authentic and are able to better express themselves than in everyday life, not because of the authenticity of the toured objects, but because constraints have been removed from their lives (Wang, 2000). Existential authenticity refers to touristic experience and the perception of "being one's true self or true to one's essential nature" (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006, p. 299). Nevertheless it is important to remember that existentialism has a subjective position and the "true" self is

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