How experiential consumption moderates the effects of souvenir authenticity on behavioral intention through perceived value

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships among souvenir authenticity, perceived value (PV) and behavioral intention (BI) in the context of experiential consumption. Using the customer data from the Pearl River Delta region of China, this empirical study adopts a PLS-SEM model to further examine the mediating effect of PV and the moderating effect of experiential consumption on the relationship between souvenir authenticity and BI. In comparison with the non-experiential consumption setting, souvenir authenticity was found to have a greater positive effect on the BI of tourist through PV in the experiential consumption setting. In addition, different dimensions of authenticity and PV are emphasized during souvenir purchases in the experiential consumption. These results deepen the understanding of souvenir authenticity and PV as well as the effects of experiential consumption for postmodern tourists. Managerial implications are provided for practitioners.

1. Introduction

People purchase souvenirs as mementos of their experiences at a particular place they have visited. A common acceptable understanding of souvenirs is that the consumption of souvenirs is part of the tourist experience (Gordon, 1986; Horodyski & Gândara, 2016). As an important element of the tourist experience, souvenirs represent images of a place visited and can strengthen identities, and trigger positive memories of traveling (Torabian & Arai, 2016). In terms of tourism culture, possessing souvenirs does not represent the acquisition of objects, but rather a collection of items of personal significance derived from a host culture, memories or experiences that provide those memories (Smith & Reid, 1994). Consequently, a souvenir may have a different meaning for each individual tourist because "they both represent the destination's image and embody tourists' experiences and are therefore related to experiential consumption" (Horodyski & Gândara, 2016, p. 884).

Souvenirs become personally meaningful to individual tourists in "a process of tangibilizing contamination through an object" (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1991, p. 22). Thus, both the personal experience of a tourist and the host culture of the place visited could be tangibilized through souvenirs. To clarify, souvenirs are the objectified result of the tangibilized contamination of the sacredness of the experience and host culture (Gordon, 1986; Stewart, 1984). Souvenirs with perceived authenticity can help tourists remember their sacred experience, including the host culture, the place and the time. Souvenir authenticity may reinforce the quest for the value of sacredness in the perspective of modernism.

However, postmodernism challenges this modernism view through breaking the boundaries of tourism, inclusive attitude, and differentiation reactions. Postmodernism emerged as an important revision movement of twentieth-century Western societies (D'Urso, Disegna, Massari, & Osti, 2016; Hassan, 1987) has extended to other parts of the world with the development of globalization (Featherstone, 2007; Jameson & Miyoshi, 1998). Characterized by affirming diversity, non-centrality, fragmentation, uncertainty, and mobility, postmodernism aims at reflecting, criticizing and transcending modernity (Susen, 2015). Therefore, postmodern tourism has been considered a generalized social condition (Tesfahuney & Schough, 2016) that includes both de-differentiation between tourism and other social realms (e.g., guest/host, non-home/home, or holidays/daily life) and differentiation against this trend towards de-differentiation (Jansson, 2018). Since the differentiations are driven by the tourists' individualistic desire (Jansson, 2018), postmodernism changes modern tourism into individual experience of tourists in a fragmentary way. Postmodern tourists thus tend to leave the traditional mode of tourism such as tour

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package (Andajani, 2018) and prefer small and specialized travel agencies (Uriely, 1997); eco-tourism (Jansson, 2018; Poon, 1993); attraction of nostalgia and heritage (Timothy, 2018); co-creating value through user-generated content; eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth); lifestyle of shared economy; SoLoMo (social-local-mobile) concerned (Carvalho, da Costa, & Ferreira, 2018); and more flexible and personalized experience (Mowforth & Munt, 2016; Poon, 1993).

In fact, postmodern tourists use their senses to evaluate the material aspects of their experiences to achieve spiritual cultural cognition (which may involve aesthetics and pleasure). Meanwhile, postmodernism attaches great importance to on-site participation, multiple values, and individual experience (Susen, 2015). The souvenir purchases with experiential consumption becomes a worthy topic in the postmodern tourism. The existing studies of tourist experience (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Brown, 2013; Cohen, 1988; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; MacCannell, 1973; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999, 2007; Zhu, 2012) has been substantially discussed authenticity as a multi-faceted concept. However, souvenirs, as authentic items related to tourist experiences, have received little attention in the literature on tourism (Torabian & Arai, 2016). As a matter of fact, previous studies have not empirically analyzed how the personal significance of souvenirs can be improved through the sanctification of their perceived authenticity. In other words, it is unclear how souvenir authenticity affects tourists' behavioral intention (BI) in the context of experiential consumption of souvenir purchases. In addition, perceived values of souvenirs as commodities (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015) could play an important role to influence BI. Thus, the key question to answer in this study is: How does experiential consumption moderate the effects of authenticity on tourists' BI? To address this question, the objective of this study is to explore, empirically, the PV linkages of souvenir authenticity and the associated mechanisms and boundary conditions. It is hypothesized that souvenir authenticity is positively related to PV, which subsequently leads to BI with experiential consumption as a moderator. The findings fill the knowledge gap and provide insights for souvenir providers to create meaningful experiential consumption settings, and thereby achieve customer loyalty.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Authenticity in tourism research

The topic of authenticity was popular "during the 1980s and 1990s and continues to drive research and debate" (Timothy & Boyd, 2006, p. 5) in discussions on tourist experiences. The concept of authenticity was borrowed by studies on tourism (Torabian & Arai, 2016) from studies on museums (Leite & Graburn, 2009). According to scholars (Moufakkir, 2015), the authenticity of culture represents this psychological tendency of tourists to seek that which is real for the destinations they visit.

Scholars and tourists have various viewpoints regarding their perceptions of authenticity. As a dynamic concept, authenticity has several theoretical perspectives (objective, constructive, postmodern, and existential) with various analytical focuses, from objects to experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Previous studies (Table 1) on authenticity have contributed to the field and include topics such as staged authenticity (Cohen, 1988), commodification, culture and authenticity (Shepherd, 2002), and the authenticity of shareholders (Cole, 2007). Since Boorstin (1964) proposed "Pseudo-Events", many studies have recognized that there are three types of authenticity: objective authenticity (Boorstin, 1964; MacCannell, 1973), constructive authenticity (Bruner, 1989; Culler, 1981), and existential authenticity (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). It is noteworthy that postmodernism has a new interpretation of authenticity. In the sociological discourse of postmodern, the "other" and the "simulational" postmodern tourism are two main theoretical frameworks (Munt, 1994). On one hand, some postmodern tourists enjoy the simulational signs of tourism in a playful, postmodern tourist manner, such as loving theme parks. On the other hand, certain postmodern tourists tend to seek out the (over) exposure of the "others", such as authentic objects or experiences of real places. For postmodern tourists, they could accept both possibilities of authenticity seeking because of compromising nature of postmodernism (Uriely, 1997). Postmodern authenticity therefore redirects its attention from the objective authenticity to the tourists' intrapersonal and interpersonal perception of their experiences. From a postmodern stance, tourists do not necessarily consider inauthenticity as problematic because they could accept any type of authenticity including objective, constructive, existential, customized, or performative authenticity. In fact, the key for a postmodern tourist (Martin, 2010) to respond to authenticity is "whether the experience is what the tourist expects" (Yi, Fu, Yu, & Jiang, 2018, p. 413).

Several scholars have investigated postmodern authenticity in tourism literature. For example, Fattah and Eddy-U (2018) indicated postmodern authenticity is in line with existential authenticity in shifting the focus from objective authenticity to the tourists' internal experiences. Wang (1999) asserted existential authenticity could be regarded as an alternative experience in tourism through a postmodern deconstruction of the original authenticity. However, Bento (2017) queried inadequacy of existential authenticity because of its theoretical inconsistencies and implementing issues in research. In addition, Yi et al. (2018) found that postmodern authenticity can enhance understanding of the subjectivity of tourist experiences. Therefore, postmodern authenticity could be considered an alternative approach. Torabian and Arai (2016) further suggested that postmodern authenticity can be used to explore tourists' experiences to strengthen future research of souvenir authenticity in tourism.

2.2. Souvenir authenticity

The concept of souvenir authenticity has received increasing attention from scholars and has become a key element of future tourism research (Swanson, 2014). In early studies on souvenirs, authors provided various definitions of souvenir authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Littrell, Anderson, & Brown, 1993). In the context of physical objects, authenticity is the property of being genuine and not counterfeit (Cohen, 1988). In the context of souvenir purchases, the perception of authenticity has been defined as the beliefs, ideas, and impressions of individuals regarding the genuineness, uniqueness, workmanship, aesthetics, utility, and cultural and historical integrity of souvenir products and their attributes (Littrell et al., 1993). However, individuals' perspectives on authenticity differ; they may evaluate souvenirs in different ways (Lin & Wang, 2012). Perhaps the most influential variable for determining authenticity is the meaning that a tourist assigns to the souvenir through a process of attributing meaning to the object (Timothy, 2005).

Notably, current tourists tend to be regarded as postmodern individuals and their concept of authenticity evolves accordingly (Goulding, 2000). The idea of authenticity is not relevant for many tourists in terms of postmodernism (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Therefore, from a management point of view, it could be problematic to emphasize the analytical clarity of authenticity and attempt to investigate exclusively the different types of authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Consequently, the assumption that the different types of authenticity (e.g., objective authenticity and existential authenticity) are independent and cannot occur simultaneously, encounters a key practical challenge. As Kolar and Zabkar (2010) noted, in practice, practitioners seek to positively affect tourist existential experiences through objects and services, mainly through the provision of authentic material items. Hence, this dilemma may be solved from the postmodernism perspective. A recent study (Shen, 2011) revealed that souvenir authenticity is a continuum determined by certain characteristics of tourists (e.g., pleasure-seeking tourists vs. serious tourists) and by the