



# Authenticity and loyalty at heritage sites: The moderation effect of postmodern authenticity

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The relationship of perceived authenticity, existential authenticity and destination loyalty was further verified.
- Perceived authenticity exerted a significant effect on destination loyalty.
- Existential authenticity transmitted positively the effect of perceived authenticity on destination loyalty.
- Postmodern authenticity moderated the effect of architectural heritage on loyalty through existential authenticity.
- Postmodern authenticity can be a vantage point to better understand the subjectivity of tourist experiences.

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## ABSTRACT

Authenticity and postmodern authenticity are often regarded as contradictory, and the two are rarely considered simultaneously by researchers. Taking as research cases two Chinese World Heritage Sites, Kaiping watchtowers in Guangdong province and Yongding earth building in Fujian province, this study constructed a relationship model of perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, and loyalty by examining the effects of tourists' perceptions of the authenticity of tangible and intangible heritage on tourists' existential authenticity and destination loyalty, as well as the relationship between existential authenticity and destination loyalty. Building upon the relationship model, this study further examined the moderating role of postmodern authenticity on the relationship between perceived authenticity and existential authenticity. Results indicated that postmodern authenticity moderates the influence of architectural heritage on existential authenticity: the higher the level of postmodern authenticity, the lower the effect. Theoretical and management implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The topic of authenticity has received much attention from scholars in different academic areas. Several types of authenticity have been examined to understand the tourism experience. *Object-based authenticity* refers to the authenticity of original objects (Wang, 1999). In line with Lau's (2010) analysis from a social realist approach, objects should not be restricted to physical things but refer to artifacts, rituals of daily life, and cultural, religious, and recreational activities. *Perceived authenticity* is tourists' perception or cognition of objective authenticity, attained from interaction

with attraction settings (McIntosh & Prentice, 1999). As perceptions are socially and culturally constructed, it is likely that tourists with different backgrounds may have different opinions of authenticity (Mura, 2015). As an ideal state of being in which individuals are true to their own values and beliefs, *existential authenticity* is another concept for understanding the effect of travel (Wang, 1999). In contrast to these three types of authenticity that have been explored in tourism contexts, however, postmodern authenticity has received much less attention.

The compromising nature of postmodern social theory emphasizes 'both-and' rather than 'either-or' (Uriely, 1997). The

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contemporary discourse of postmodernism reflects a more critical, more relativistic, nondualistic, and antihierarchical point of view. Derived from postmodernism and formally introduced to tourism studies by Wang (1999), *postmodern authenticity* accepts the inauthenticity of toured objects, the deconstruction of the objective definition of authenticity, and the justification of staged authenticity, hyper-reality, and dreamlike constructions, and thus can be a less authoritative and more pluralized concept (Zerva, 2015). Butler (2013) maintained that both authenticity and postmodern authenticity are relative, as the assessment depends on tourists' personal experience, values, judgment, and preexisting social realities. Correspondingly, the perception of authenticity is a product of different frameworks of assessment, which are determined by such contexts as cultural norms and individual standards. In postmodern conditions, only a limited number of tourist experiences can be explained by object-related authenticity, while a wider range of experiences are pertinent to existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). For example, some tourists would think certain objects are authentic or genuine, while others would think otherwise.

Studies of perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, and postmodern authenticity are producing separate discourses (Gao, Zhang, & Decosta, 2012; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999), despite some recent efforts at bridging them (Mura, 2015; Shepherd, 2015). Early work on perceived authenticity and existential authenticity consists mostly of conceptual elaborations and qualitative studies (Brown, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), while quantitative assessment of the relationship between authenticity and other variables is emerging. As our knowledge of authenticity in tourism experience expands, however, different types of authenticity have rarely been studied in the same context. Furthermore, as noted by some scholars (e.g., Uriely, 1997), the role of postmodern authenticity in tourism has seldom been quantitatively investigated.

Moreover, tourism researchers began to examine the relationship of authenticity and tourist loyalty and found that authenticity affects attitudinal loyalty (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and behavioral loyalty (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Akhoondnejad, 2016). However, existing studies were largely confined to one type of authenticity (mostly perceived authenticity), without considering tourist loyalty in tandem with different authenticities. To address the knowledge gap, the current study aimed to examine perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, postmodern authenticity, and their relationship with destination loyalty in the setting of heritage attractions. Specifically, we sought to apply postmodern authenticity as a vantage point from which to better understand and decompose the tourist experience at heritage sites. Since the "absolute" authenticity of historical sites, namely the object-based authenticity, and postmodern authenticity appear to be contradictory, it is meaningful to assess the heritage tourists' perception of authenticity within the parameters of postmodern authenticity. The findings provide insights for heritage attractions to design personally meaningful experiences and build destination loyalty.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Tourists' perceived authenticity of cultural heritage

Cultural heritage consists of both tangible heritage, such as buildings and monuments, and intangible heritage, such as oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and festive events (UNESCO, 2016). In line with Vecco's (2010) statement, tangible cultural heritage is evaluated mainly with objective criteria, while intangible culture heritage is assessed with subjective criteria. Although the two types of heritage are often inseparable and are

equally important, the key question lies in the capacity of the object to stimulate certain values that lead the public to consider it as heritage. Heritage tourism, thus, is the experience of spaces with both tangible and intangible elements (Poria & Ashworth, 2009).

The change in the usage of tangible heritage will threaten intangible heritage (Suntikul & Jachna, 2013). Not only does heritage tourism heavily rely on the relationship between supply and demand, like other modes of tourism, it also centers on tourists' perception of heritage attributes (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003). The concept of *heritagization*, as postulated by Poria and Ashworth (2009), signifies visitors' internalization of the tangible and intangible elements as part of their own personal heritage, which constitutes the core of heritage tourism. This idea was echoed by Knudsen, Rickly, and Vidon (2016), who emphasized that tourists' authentic experience is actually a process of self-rationalization. Certain lifestyles, values, and dispositions that are missing in one's routine life can be fulfilled through travel.

The concept of authenticity was postulated by MacCannell (1973) in a tourism context and was further developed and expanded by subsequent researchers (e.g., Kim & Jamal, 2007; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Shepherd, 2015; Wang, 1999). Simply put, authenticity is the origin or essence of an object, which can be used as knowledge and/or as feeling. Since perceptual processes are always mental states (Di Betta, 2014), experiencing authenticity is in fact a mental state. Authentication marks the process by which the authenticity of an attraction is perpetuated and confirmed (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Two authentication modes of tourist attractions, namely "cool" and "hot," are conducive to different types of personal experiences of authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). The "cool" authentication is static or declarative, based on accepted norms, testimony, or expert knowledge of objective (object-based) authenticity, while the "hot" authentication is dynamic, related to the quest for an authentic self and authentic others through a constitutive process. The latter category can be an ongoing process that involves complex interplay with tourists' authentically imagined past (Bryce, Murdy, & Alexander, 2017). Tourism and its contextual environment can promote the experiences triggered by authenticity, which are usually short-lived (Mura, 2015). Therefore, authenticity is a place-bound concept, and the place-specific features such as souvenirs are either coupled with or embedded within authenticity (Swanson & Timothy, 2012). That is to say, tourists' perception of authenticity is formed through the interaction with local architecture, people, souvenirs, food, events, rituals, etc.

Previous studies have shown that tourists' perceived authenticity of heritage attractions or festivals consists of assessment of both tangible and intangible aspects of the toured sites. Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Morey, Griffin, and Riley (2017) found that tourists' authentic experiences can be produced and cocreated through sociospatial factors such as a festival's design, organization, and management, while Robinson and Clifford (2012) reported that the chefs and their cooking regime convey authenticity in the food service dimensions of medieval festivals. Furthermore, Rickly-Boyd (2012) posited that authenticity is formed through ritual, tradition, and the distinctive atmosphere of the place, which are mutually constitutive in promoting the state of authenticity.

Similarly, tourists' perceptions of authenticity can interact with both the tangible, such as architectural heritage, and the intangible, such as the folk culture of the toured heritage sites (e.g., Yi, Lin, Jin, & Luo, 2017). Architectural heritage relates to original buildings, interior design and decoration of the buildings, and surrounding atmosphere or environment, while folk culture involves local people's apparel, art (i.e., paintings, carvings), local stories or legends, traditional appliances still in use in

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