



# Authenticity and place attachment of major visitor attractions



Y. Ram <sup>a, b, \*</sup>, P. Björk <sup>b</sup>, A. Weidenfeld <sup>b, c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ashkelon Academic College, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Hanken School of Economics, Finland

<sup>c</sup> Middlesex University, UK

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Place attachment is an antecedent of authenticity of visitor attractions.
- Heritage value and iconicity are moderators of perceived authenticity.
- Visitor attractions contribute to the perceived authenticity of tourism destinations.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the relationships between place attachment and perceived authenticity of major visitor attractions. The empirical study was conducted with a sample of international tourists to major visitor attractions in two capital cities, Helsinki, Finland and Jerusalem, Israel. The results indicate a positive correlation between place attachment and authenticity. Major visitor attractions located in places with considerable heritage experience value are considered more authentic, and that authenticity of visitor attractions is influenced by place attachment moderated by iconicity and heritage value of the destination region. These findings provide insight to the ways tourists perceive authenticity of visitor attractions and highlight the importance of the heritage value of tourism destinations for strategic planning and marketing purposes.

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## 1. Introduction

Major visitor attractions stand out as the strongest pull-factors of a destination and are considered as key destination resources for development and marketing. They are often defined as flagship and/or iconic objects/structures/projects, which draw a relatively large number of visitors to their premises and/or to their region. Although they are often considered a catalyst for economic development (e.g. Grodach, 2008, Grodach, 2010; Plaza, 2008; Miles, 2005; Law, 2002), there is insufficient knowledge on their touristic appeal, which has far-reaching consequences including the need for ongoing public funding to keep them operational (Weidenfeld, 2010). Visitor attractions have been analyzed out of three different perspectives (Brown, 2003). The ideographic perspective focuses on the physical and cultural features of a place. The organizational perspective discusses the relationship between

attractions, how they compete or play together on a destination, and the third, cognitive one focuses on how tourists perceive attractions. In this paper, visitor attractions are approached through the lens of a cognitive perspective pertaining tourist perception of authenticity and place attachment.

Authenticity in the context of tourism suppliers is perceived as an essential asset of firms that provide services for consumers, which are not only satisfied with low costs and high quality, but also seek for genuine experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2008). However, this approach ignores how consumers perceive authenticity. The current paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring the ways consumers perceived authenticity. Yet, instead of focusing on the general context of experiences, the work will explore the special context of tourism, and more specifically the ways tourists perceive authenticity of major visitor attractions.

The link between authenticity and experience has been widely discussed by tourism scholars (e.g. MacCannel, 1973; Rickly Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999). Apart from existential authenticity (Wang, 1999), the main discussion has been between the essentialism and the constructivism perspectives, and questioned whether the authenticity reflects a true image of the past (essentialism) or if it is

\* Corresponding author. Department of Tourism and Leisure Studies, Ashkelon Academic College, Ben Zvi 12, Ashkelon, 78211, Israel.

E-mail addresses: [yaelram@gmail.com](mailto:yaelram@gmail.com), [ramy@acad.ash-college.ac.il](mailto:ramy@acad.ash-college.ac.il) (Y. Ram).

a subject to contemporary inputs and influences (constructivism) (for full review about the subject, Chhabra, 2008). However, this debate can be perceived as a sociological concern rather than a managerial issue, and thus does not correspond to Pine and Gilmore's (2008) ideas of authenticity. In line with Pine and Gilmore's observation, Kolar and Zabkar's (2010) portrayed authenticity by the enjoyment of tourists and by the tourists' perception of "how genuine are their experiences" (p. 654).

Place attachment represents individuals' emotional bindings to geographic areas and has been researched for its dimensionality, effects and influence on tourists' perception of environmental and social conditions encountered on tour (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Lee & Shen, 2013). However, its links to authenticity in tourism have been largely ignored. Therefore, this paper aims to explore these understudied relationships between tourist perception of authenticity and place attachment in tourism, by focusing on the visitor attraction sector through from a cognitive perspective. It is original in suggesting indicators to measure perceived authenticity and place attachment of visitor attractions and in examining the concept of iconicity in relation to authenticity of major visitor attractions. Given that perceived authenticity and iconicity are often more relevant to the heritage tourism context, the paper also examines the influence of heritage value of destination regions and iconicity on perceived authenticity of major visitor attractions.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Authentic authenticity

Extensive research addresses the construct of authenticity, its dimensions and different types of index to measure levels of authenticity in organizational messages and actions, as well as perceived authenticity from the stakeholders' perspective. Special attention was put on tools and mediators between the public and organizations (See Molleda, 2010). The meaning and interpretation of what is authentic and what authenticity means can be approached in at least three different ways: its characteristics, levels of verification (or experience), and a state of being. A summary of the definitions of 'authentic' from several dictionaries by Molleda (2010) can be used to describe individuals, objects, communication products and events, and all types of organizations. In tourism, it is often related to toured objects, tourism sites, and tourist experiences (Rickly Boyd, 2012).

'Authentic' is often described in terms of its characteristics being real, reliable, trustworthy, original, first hand, true in substance, and prototypical as opposed to copied, reproduced or done the same way as an original. Objective authenticity differs from constructive, symbolic authenticity (Barthel, 1996; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) and is based on originality and the genuineness of objects and sites verified by experts (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Symbolic authenticity, in contrast, is determined by the tourist being subjective, negotiable and contextual. Within the framework of a constructive approach of authenticity, major visitor attractions offer services and experiences, which constitute economic value, and their scope of authenticity can include exceptional and referential authenticity respectively (Molleda, 2010). Exceptional authentic refers to what "... people tend to perceive as authentic that which is done exceptionally well, executed individually and extraordinarily by someone demonstrating human care; not unfeelingly or disingenuously performed" (Molleda, 2010, p. 230). Referential authentic refers to what "... people tend to perceive as authentic that which refers to some other context, drawing inspiration from human history, and tapping into our shared memories and longings; no derivative or trivial" (Molleda, 2010, p. 230). Authenticity as a 'state of being' includes a philosophical discussion

of the self in context (external world) and a reflection of how true one is to oneself balancing two parts of one's being, rational and emotional. This perspective defines "existential authenticity as an alternative experience in tourism" (Wang, 1999, p. 358) with a focus on how open minded the tourist is to his/her experiences in the liminal spaces tourism offers (Brown, 2013).

The kaleidoscopic twist in this study emphasizes a tourist perspective on authenticity being subjective and experiential (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). This approach aims to explore how tourists perceive authenticity in terms of an evaluation of its "genuineness", when visiting major visitor attractions. In so doing, this research adds to the ongoing discussion of authenticity of visitor attractions, which, so far, has been mainly theoretical (Brown, 2013; Molleda, 2010; Rickly Boyd, 2012), and focused on antecedents and consequences of authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar; 2010).

### 2.2. Place attachment – the self and the place

The emotional link between the self and the place is known in psychology as 'place attachment' (Gross & Brown, 2006; Gross & Brown, 2008; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003; Kyle et al., 2004). This link produces "the sense of physically being and feeling 'in place' or 'at home'" (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010, p. 275) and provides a sense of trust and security (Tsai, 2012). In tourism, place attachment is analyzed as a multifaceted concept, which is constituted of two to four interrelated components (Gross & Brown, 2006, 2008; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005; Kyle et al., 2003, 2004; Ramkinsoon, Weiler, & Smith, 2012; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010). The first component, *place identity*, represents the identification of the tourist with a certain place or with its symbolic value (Gross & Brown, 2006, 2008; Hwang et al., 2005; Kyle et al., 2003, 2004; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010). The second, *place dependence*, describes how much a specific place meets the tourists' needs, and can be perceived as the functional attachment component (Gross & Brown, 2006, 2008; Hwang et al., 2005; Kyle et al., 2003, 2004; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010). The third, *affective attachment*, has so far received limited attention (Kyle et al., 2004; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010), and refers to the strong feeling tourists feel towards a destination. The fourth, the *social bond*, does not relate directly to spatial aspects, but to the social relations a specific place enhances (Kyle et al., 2004; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012).

The question if place attachment is best described by three different facets is still open. The different facets of place attachments were found as significantly interrelated in previous studies (Gross & Brown, 2008; Kyle et al., 2003; Yuksel et al., 2010). However, other studies refer to place attachment as a one-dimensional construct, either as a unified latent variable (Hwang et al., 2005; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012) or an observational construct (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). In the light of the interdependence between the facets of place attachment, and based on previous studies which examined the place attachment construct as a unified dimension (Hwang et al., 2005; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012), the current study addressed place attachment as a unified construct with a single dimension.

Three branches were identified in the context of place attachment in the subjective tourist experience research: the first branch views place attachment as an independent variable or as an antecedent of tourists' behaviors and attitudes. It focuses on prediction of visit outcomes based on tourists' place attachment levels (Hwang et al., 2005; Ramkinsoon et al., 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010) and on prediction of pro-environment behaviors (Ramkinsoon et al., 2012). The second refers to place attachment as a mediator between antecedents and outcomes and analyzes the mediating

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