



Visitors' engagement and authenticity: Japanese heritage consumption



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tests a structural model (PLS) using both formative and reflective scales.
- Integrating/introducing a visitors' engagement concept to authenticity.
- Focuses on Japanese visitors' experience of authenticity.
- Concepts: serious leisure, heritage behaviors, self-connection and engagement.
- Objective authenticity and engagement centric model presented.

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the sense of authenticity of heritage attractions is important for tourism management and marketing because presentation, interpretation and verification has a direct bearing on motivations to visit and engage with heritage tourism sites. This paper establishes relationships among the concepts of culturally specific motivation, perception of authenticity, engagement and attendant behavioral consequences based on domestic visitors' experiences at Japanese heritage sites. It further extends Kolar and Zabkar's (2010) model of authenticity by including concepts of serious leisure, heritage related behaviors, self-connection and their effects over engagement using Partial Least Square, whereby both formative and reflective scales are included. The structural model is tested with a sample of 768 visitors in a culturally specific setting of Japanese heritage sites. The empirical validation of the conceptual model supports the research hypotheses. These findings contribute to a better understanding of visitors' perceptions and valuation of authenticity in Japanese tourist attractions. Several implications can be drawn from the study findings and interesting directions for future research are provided.

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1. Introduction

Japanese consumers' views and distinctive perspectives on heritage authenticity are investigated in order to explore and challenge the prevailing western-centric perceptions in the literature. Furthermore this addresses the theoretical gap surrounding heritage authenticity and engagement, in particular, testing the idea that tourists' engagement may vary in authentic consumption experiences (Black, 2009; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Within tourism, authenticity and engagement research has mainly focused on its application to non-Asian settings (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). However, select studies have considered aspects of authenticity in East Asia,

namely China (Xie, 2003; Zhou, Zhang, & Edelman, 2013), Korea (Cho, 2012), Macau (Wong, 2013) and a passing reference to Japan (Ehrentraut, 1993). Japan has a capitalist economy and a multi-party democracy; self-styling itself as a Western economy in the far-east (Horne, 1998). Historically, Japanese society has enjoyed low crime rates, high levels of education and an economically prosperous large middle class. Japan shares certain cultural commonalities with Asian neighbors such as China and Korea (Ralston, Holt, Terpstra, & Kai-Cheng, 1997), in particular Confucianism emphasizing the importance of the group, and self-sacrifice, however, Japanese society applied it critically to its own culture (Yan & Pan, 2010). Thus, Japan's heritage tourism, as a context for this study, is shown to be distinctive from its Asian neighbors, including South Korea, because of the maturity and distinctiveness of its domestic heritage tourism market and the divergent cultural sensibilities relative to its neighbors.

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A broader concept of authenticity within a new context is investigated: cultural heritage sites in Japan. The legacy of the romantic gaze and the commodification of heritage (Goody, 2006; Rigney, 2001) impose assumptions of antiquity and genuineness on heritage products. In Japan certain factors have conspired against this; a great number of structures are made of wood which tend to decay over time, combined with seismic events (earthquakes and tsunami), and the legacy of Allied bombing in WWII have necessitated extensive restoration or reconstruction. This is not perceived to be the same as Las Vegas building its own version of the Great Pyramid of Giza, however, it does open up some interesting research questions around staged authenticity, primarily, how visitors' engagement can be influenced by their: perceptions of authenticity, preconceived behaviors, and motivations, and how these four concepts influence loyalty.

This paper now splits into five sections. First it briefly explores authenticity debates within the extant literature. The authors identify limitations in the existing discourse, specifically highlighting a theoretical gap relating to engagement and notions of authenticity. Next, the notion of authenticity is framed within a Japanese context. In the second part of the paper, the authors extend Kolar and Zabkar's (2010) model of authenticity by including concepts of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 1996), Heritage Related Behaviors (McDonald, 2011), Self-Connections (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010) and their influences over engagement (Taheri & Jafari, 2012; Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014). This leads to a new conceptual framework that allows tourist site managers to position and develop their attractions. As well as providing theoretical development, it also highlights the contextual gap in the strength of the overseas Japanese market and its own home market. Drawn from the literature, the authors create a four-stage conceptual model focused on authenticity, but underpinned by visitors' preconceived ideas, motivations, levels of engagement, and ultimately loyalty to a site. The next section is empirical; the authors first outline the methodological approach, before presenting the results of the survey where the authors test a structural model using both formative and reflective scales (Taheri et al., 2014; Zabkar, Brencic, & Dmitrovic, 2010). In the final section of the paper: the authors draw together the threads of the argument, offering conclusions and a consideration of implications for the industry before highlighting the limitations of the approach, and pointing to avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. The authenticity debate

Debates on the possibility of 'authenticity' in industrialized cultural production can be traced to the Frankfurt School's Marxian critique of consumers cast as 'objects of calculation ... [and] an appendage of machinery' (Adorno, 1991) to be categorized through 'interpellation' (Althusser, 2008). Less pessimistic developments in consumer culture and related theory ameliorate this with notions of contingency and dispersal of consumer reception, relationships and engagement with cultural goods via multiple 'audiences' (Bell, 1996; Collins, 1989; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Horne, 1986; Latour, 2010; Slater, 1997; Williams, 1963). Given that tourism destination competitiveness is largely bound up with the real or imagined specificities of place, it is unsurprising that the notion of authenticity has been taken up and refined within this field. There is a constant tension amongst tourists' expectation of authenticity at popular heritage sites, the industry's ability to fulfill this without commodifying the attraction itself and consumer authentication of that commodity through repeated use and habituation (Cohen, 2004; MacCannell, 1999). Tourist notions of authenticity are largely

driven by connection and association with and quality of experience of the site, they are not necessarily responsive to rigid criteria of truth and falsehood (Hall, 2007; King, 2007; Shackley, 1994).

If it is accepted that specialist authentication of heritage sites and cultural objects is beyond all tourists in all situations, then the authors are left with the relationship between industry mediation and consumer reception (Asplet & Cooper, 2000; McIntosh, 2004; Park et al., 2010; Swanson & Timothy, 2012). Theoretical and contextually applied work that tries to bridge this gap between the two includes notions of tourist agency through existential and creative authenticity (de Rojas & Camarero, 2008; Gonzalez, 2008; Park et al., 2010; Richards & Wilson, 2006; Wang, 1999), other authors have posited the existence of 'constructive authenticity' as a response to 'object based authenticity', in which tourists are complicit in and aware of the mediation, reconstruction, modification and commodification of cultural heritage in the pursuit of quality of experience (Guttentag, 2010; Henderson, 2000; Ryan & Gu, 2010; Stebbins, 2009; Wang, 1999).

This unsettled debate on the fluidity of mediation and tourism reception of 'authenticity' may be a manifestation of multiple modes of identity formation that transcend the area of tourism consumption (Lau, 2010; McDonald, 2011; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Rickley-Boyd, 2012). This leads to the questions posed by this paper on how specific culturally and historically contingent modes of thought with relation to markers of antiquity, provenance and 'heritage' itself impact on more generally applied conceptualizations of tourist understandings of 'authenticity'.

2.2. Culturally specific notions of authenticity: Japan

It is a truism of Cultural Studies that discourse is culturally contingent and produces its own reality (Said, 1978). Since the academic study of tourism, has been largely filtered through 'The Western' and specifically 'Anglocentric' institutional lenses and assumptions up until now, an attempt to broaden conceptualization to wider frames of thought is necessary. In this paper, it is done in the spirit of Barthes (1982), who attempted to apprehend the normality of Japanese culture while retaining the knowledge that its 'strangeness' was a product of his own cultural position. Since the notion of authenticity is itself a social construct, it is examined here through the lens of Japanese heritage consumers', understandings of its meaning and importance.

Japanese heritage policy mandates, in principle, the maintenance of the integrity of individual sites (Ehrentraut, 1993). Yet, because of historical tendency to build in wood, seismic instability in the region and the devastation visited upon the country in World War II, 'ancient' structures have often been repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt over time (Miyazaki et al., 2002). There is a value attached to 'aestheticization' in Japanese culture, which may be receptive to manipulation of atmosphere to suit state and corporate driven collective social norms. Yet, this is ameliorated by tendencies towards collective consumption of tourist sites constructed on overlapping, but not always simultaneous, notions of racial, ethnic and national identities which may be receptive to external validation and 'branding' by authenticating bodies such as the UNESCO World Heritage Site list (Ehrentraut, 1993; Graburn & Butler, 1995; Jimura, 2011). Preliminary secondary sources suggest that the cultural particularity of Japanese heritage supply and tourist conception of it presents this as an appropriate context upon which to cross-cut the discussion of authenticity with national specificity.

3. Conceptual model and theoretical foundation

A four-stage conceptual model has been developed from the literature to advance the consumer-based model of authenticity

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