



Authenticity in tourism theory and experience. Practically indispensable and theoretically mischievous?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 July 2020

Received in revised form 21 March 2021

Accepted 6 April 2021

Available online 21 April 2021

Associate editor: Jillian Rickly

Keywords:

Authenticity

Existential authenticity

Sincerity

Embodiment

Theory

ABSTRACT

The notion of authenticity arises in tourism research in two ways: In theory, as a contentious, complicated and disputed construct; empirically, as a recurrent theme in accounts of tourist experiences of place and culture and as a quality of tourists' experiences. This duality creates tension over the utility of authenticity in research and theory. We review recent literature on authenticity within tourism scholarship –and more generally– and propose a partial resolution of this tension through demystifying the concept. We do this by highlighting its embeddedness in the activity of both research and tourism. That is, we conclude that authenticity can shed its problematic dualism by understanding how it is used in theorising and the activities of tourism.

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Introduction

The concept of authenticity has been contested within tourism theory and research for decades and yet holds a dominant role in tourism practice, despite its conceptual elusiveness. Accounts of authenticity have highlighted its conceptual polymorphism, intangibility and even ineffableness. A decade ago, Cohen and Cohen (2012, p. 1295) concluded that “the discussion failed to lead to a broad consensus, which would make authenticity the anchor of a general paradigm for the study of modern tourism”. Further conceptual and empirical work has happened since (e.g., Knudsen et al., 2016; Rickly & McCabe, 2017; Sarial-Abi et al., 2020; Tiberghien et al., 2017; Tiberghien et al., 2020) but authenticity remains conceptually contested and has taken few steps towards becoming an ‘anchor’ for a tourism paradigm.

At the same time authenticity has been widely invoked in practice including its widespread use to brand tourism products, such as ‘authentic’ food, sites, and experiences (e.g., Belhassen & Caton, 2006; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Beyond tourism, people use authenticity “to evaluate a vast number of goods and experiences”, whether that be clothes, luxury goods, dining, food and beverage, art or visiting museums (Newman, 2019, p. 8). Some claim that consumers crave authenticity above all other attributes (MacCannell, 1976; Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Given that the concept of authenticity is interpreted in multiple ways and highly debated how can this utility for tourism (in both supply and demand) best be understood? Previous work on authenticity has been suggestive of an answer but has not yet reached a firm consensus. To summarise, the concept of authenticity seems unavoidable and important in practice but, despite devoted efforts over decades, its theoretical status remains unclear.

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In this context, it is worth noting that the phrase 'authentic experience' can have two distinct uses: It can be used to denote *experiences of the authentic* (e.g., of authentic objects, places, peoples, cultures, etc.); it can also be used to denote *personal experiences of authenticity* (e.g., feelings that one's experiences are real, genuine and meaningful and that one is acting in an authentic manner). Our argument is that both these uses can be seen as parts of one process that is expressed in the activity of tourists (and, more generally, of people). That activity seeks and then enacts 'ways to go on' in the world which, when successful, signify connection and embeddedness. Relative to the meaningfulness of the activity, objects, places, other people, etc. must be taken as authentic (*experiences of the authentic*) in order to support feelings of real, genuine and meaningful experiences (*experiences of authenticity*). To emphasise, the authentic nature of an object is *relative to the meaningful use* through which a tourist (or person) encounters the object, etc. within their activity.

To make this argument, in this paper we have two related aims. As with other research (e.g., Belhassen & Caton, 2006; Knudsen et al., 2016), our first aim is to make the case for the continuing relevance of the notion of authenticity in understanding tourism. The second is to present an explanation of authenticity that reduces the tension between the concept's various and much discussed conceptualizations in tourism theory and that, in turn, clarifies its practical utility.

Authenticity, we argue, arises from, and in the context of, connections that we will discuss soon. But first, we need to consider recent developments in the understanding of authenticity in the tourism literature. Then, we broaden the scope of the discussion to include developments in other, related, areas of social scientific and psychological study. In particular, studies in psychology and social psychology on the 'true' or 'authentic' self will be considered with an eye to their relevance for disentangling the understanding of authenticity in tourism studies. Work on the psychology of the self has focused on the personal experiential/existential aspects indicative of an 'authentic self' (i.e., a true, yet hidden, self that has stability over time despite being uncovered via 'growth', 'actualization', and 'becoming'). Similarly, many conceptual analyses of authenticity in the tourism literature have focussed on its experiential and existential aspects (e.g., Buchmann et al., 2010; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). In short, we claim that close, and comparative, analysis can clarify the reasons behind the difficult and complicated role the concept of authenticity has played in tourism studies.

Tourism debates on authenticity

The notion of 'authenticity' is seemingly irrepressible within tourism scholarship. Previous work has provided a variety of overviews of the various debates and discussions that have taken place (often within the *Annals of Tourism Research*). We will therefore not simply replicate those reviews but instead contextualise our thoughts in this section.

Tourism is broadly understood as a convergence of people, places and objects. People travel to places and interact with these objects and this activity is mediated by both an industry and broader resident community. Because of that convergence, the investigation of links between authenticity and tourism has reflected these various aspects and interests. Typically—while acknowledging multiple approaches to authenticity—previous work has tended to focus on one of several different categories or types of authenticity such as object (or materialist/objective) authenticity, constructed (constructivist) authenticity, and experiential (often, existentialist) authenticity.

Concerns over the viability of 'object authenticity' have often led to critiques via the sociological elucidation of the various social and political ways in which the process of authentication proceeds (e.g., the interesting distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' authentication as proposed by Cohen & Cohen, 2012, to which we return). In parallel, there has been a constructivist interest in the way authentic places, rituals and peoples are continuously and dynamically constructed. For example, it is apparent in Bruner's (1994) attempt to undermine the binary between the 'original' and the 'reproduction' through a constructivist analysis and, so, dispense with the need for a notion of the authentic. There has also been a strong theme examining existential approaches to authenticity and to its conceptual 'cousin', alienation (e.g., Knudsen et al., 2016; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

In order to attempt an intellectual bridging of these diverse forms or categories of authenticity, Knudsen and Waade (2010) addressed authenticity as performance. They proposed the concept of *performative* authenticity as a way of bridging the objective-subjective discussion in tourism studies (i.e., between the question of the authentic nature of toured 'objects' and personal experiences of (existential) authenticity in tourism) because it points to transformative processes in the action of authentication. Performative authenticity not only signifies how places are performed but also includes authentication through an emotional relatedness to places. They therefore suggest 'indexical authenticity' because it transcends the opposition between the objectivity of the place and the subjectivity of the tourist. In their account, authenticity can be experienced emotionally through the body, performances and media in relation to place. This follows Wang's (1999) constructive authenticity but takes it further by including emotion. Relatedly, Buchmann et al. (2010) highlighted the continued significance of 'authentic' film tourism experiences. This held true even when tourists toured sites that could be better characterized as hyperreal or as simulacra. Ultimately, the authors found that embodiment, affection and existential—instead of objective—authenticity mattered most for film tourists. Månsson (2010) also explored authenticity in relation to popular culture and embodiment. She concluded that authenticity is an ongoing process that is constructed, contested and negotiated through mediatized senses and embodied experiences of place.

Authenticity as action

Knudsen and Waade (2010), Månsson (2010) and Buchmann et al. (2010) focus, as we do, on authenticity as action. However, we take this approach further and propose that the emotional, affective experience of authenticity—and the sense of connection it generates—depends upon a particular form of immediate meaningful encounter that existential accounts of authentic tourist

experiences highlight (e.g., Knudsen et al., 2016; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) and that can be understood as part of the *action* of a subject rather than as an experiential *state* (of affect or emotion) produced by the action. Through this analysis we show how objectivist, constructivist, and existential accounts of authenticity can be understood as emphasizing particular aspects of a single process.

An existential focus is most clearly demonstrated in Steiner and Reisinger's (2006) Heideggerian analysis of authenticity in tourism. For Heidegger, these authors claim, existential authenticity arises when individuals project their uniqueness onto the realm of the existential possibilities for action, especially as they arise in rare 'situations'. An individual's uniqueness stems from the 'heritage' of each individual (past experiences and endowment) and contrasts with the 'destiny' of the society or social group in which they may belong or with which they may identify. Thus, authenticity involves projecting the possibilities of one's unique heritage while inauthenticity is expressed through conformity with collective responses and meanings. That is, the projection of the 'destiny' of the group that all members of the group have in common thus overwhelms or submerges the possibility of a completely authentic expression of individual heritage. Importantly, the self that acts authentically is not some fixed 'thing' but a dynamic activity continuously formed—or forged and re-forged—out of authentic acts. These acts give rise to the momentary and elusive experiences of authenticity for the tourist. In this analysis, existential authenticity is an experience of unique individuality, fleetingly and tantalizingly experienced within a massive ocean of 'they-ness'.

The assumption of a fundamentally pre-social existence was further explored by Knudsen et al. (2016) in their application of a Lacanian analysis of alienation (the "close cousin" of authenticity) to the experiential aspects of authenticity in tourism. When MacCannell (1976, 1999) popularised the notion of 'authenticity' as a significant tourism motivation he understood it as a reaction to the alienated existence provided by modernity with its increasingly differentiated and fragmentary world of change and difference. Touring is a (even 'the') major attempt to reconcile these fragments with the aim of repairing the fracture experienced as alienation. For Knudsen et al. (2016), Lacan's crucial insight was that alienation was not just the result of capitalism (as a Marxist analysis would emphasise) or even of 'modernity', as others such as MacCannell (1999) assumed. Instead, alienation is an unavoidable 'by-product' of becoming a 'Subject', or an 'I'. Inherent in acting as a Subject is the necessity of being separated or alienated from the 'other'. Without that separation the very idea of taking oneself as a Subject becomes impossible. (The Lacanian details of this process are laid out by Knudsen et al. (2016) but are not central to our discussion). Thus, alienation is an inevitable and irreparable aspect of being Subjects in a social world. The only way to escape alienation would, therefore, be to cease to be a Subject (or 'ego' in Freudian terms).

Cool and hot authenticity

When, in tourism studies, experiential authenticity is understood in existentialist terms there is an apparent disconnect with other interests in the authenticity of places, cultural 'performances' and toured objects. What, does the question of the authentic nature of the world beyond the Subject have to do with the experience of authenticity (or, its converse, alienation)? These seemingly widely separated 'dots' were connected by Cohen and Cohen (2012). In an attempt to resurrect research interest in processes of authentication (as opposed to the experience of authenticity), these authors argued that there are two distinct types of authentication process, each linked to distinct tourist experiences of the authentic. Briefly, 'cool' authentication involves the emotionally detached, collectively determined processes used to identify the provenance and constitution of objects, ritual performances, and places typically carried out by some acknowledged (though often contested) 'authority'. This is authentication by experts who use technical methods to determine authenticity. It results in a stable, if not permanent, certification of some object or practice as authentic. Tourists who experience this form of authentication are likely to experience 'appreciation' that, indeed, they are looking at an authentic Rembrandt masterpiece.

By contrast, 'hot' authentication does not proceed from any obvious authority (though powerful interests may try to nudge the process one way or the other). Instead, it results from the continued performative and usually emotionally charged practices of many people, including tourists. The object or ritual, for example, is 'authenticated' by virtue of these practices which repeatedly testify to their authenticity. Authenticity that arises from this form of authentication is experienced with far stronger emotional (or 'spiritual') impact. 'Appreciation' just does not do justice, for example, to the experience of being deeply embedded—both physically and emotionally—in the crowds at an 'authentic' Football Association Cup final. According to Cohen and Cohen (2012), this emotional response manifests a 'deeper' experience of existential authenticity – touching, so to speak, the parts of our Being that 'cool' authentication processes can never reach. Finally, it is clear that the two forms of authentication Cohen and Cohen (2012) describe can be contested, both within and between each. It can be upsetting when an expert undermines one's faith in a 'reality' that has structured much of one's behaviour and emotional experience.

There are obvious insights into the practice of tourism from the above discussions and debates over authenticity in the theoretical literature. Both in terms of supply and demand, it is clear, for example, how seeking—and fleetingly manifesting—a Heideggerian sense of 'who you really are' can be expressed through tourism; how the insatiable pursuit to heal Lacanian (or other forms of) alienation plays itself out through evanescent fantasies of authenticity; or how contestation between 'hot' and 'cool' processes of authentication might pervade everyday occurrences of tourism and the tourist experience. We believe, however, that there is still something incomplete in these analyses.

Being and connecting

Comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell once stated that people are not actually seeking an answer to the question of the 'meaning of life'. Instead, what they seek is the 'experience of being alive'. His point was that what is sought is not an answer

to a question but a way of living (in the active sense of living a life). Existential philosophers—and constructivist theorists—have, in various ways, acknowledged the dynamic experience of 'Being' (e.g., Heidegger's rejection of the notion that the true self is a static 'thing'). Therefore, in the context of tourism, authentic 'experience' can be understood principally in terms of activity. When tourists 'have' an experience it would be better to say that they 'enact' it rather than that they possess some internal mental state. Importantly, as [Rickly-Boyd \(2012\)](#) makes clear in her Benjaminian analysis of 'aura', whatever seemingly momentary encounter a tourist may have with some object, ritual, or other attraction it remains an (inter)action. The experienced 'aura' of an object, landscape, or person is part of an act in process, despite it presenting as an instantaneous encounter with the object as a whole.

For Benjamin, to experience the aura of an object is to interact with it in the expectation of reciprocity. This reciprocity highlights the "intersubjective nature" of aura (i.e., that it is between two 'subjects', despite one subject being an object) ([Rickly-Boyd, 2012](#), p. 275). Even this expectation is not a state but part of the activity.

We often only notice that we 'have' an expectation when it is unmet, when reciprocity of action is incomplete or goes unfulfilled. Experiencing this unmet reciprocity and, therefore, the uncertainty about 'how to go on' may well be similar to Heidegger's notion of *Angst* (understood existentially rather than in its common-or-garden form referred to as 'anxiety'). That is, authenticity refers not so much to a *sense* of being grounded in the world but arises when our activity, including our (self-) discursive activity, aligns or merges with the world in a smooth, near-frictionless manner; and thus opens up a way, or many ways, to go on.

We argue there is good reason to believe that it is this activity-based experience of a 'fit' between one's activity and the world that leads tourists to explain their experience as being authentic to varying degrees and, significantly, as bringing forth their 'authentic self', beyond the constrained category of being merely a 'tourist'. The feelings of connectedness that so often accompany authentic experiences are *expressive* of the 'pathways' of action that allow the tourist to 'go on' in the tourism setting. These connections are performatively manifested and legitimated (e.g., [Knudsen & Waade, 2010](#)). Experiences of the authentic (i.e., of authentic objects, places, people, rituals, food, etc.) and of authenticity (i.e., acting in accord with one's 'true self' and, so, having 'real' experiences) can be understood as expressive of various types of connectedness. In the context of heritage, for example, authenticity can be experienced and understood as the 'reciprocal negotiation' and assertion of the meaningful connectedness of objects, people and places. Similarly, the authenticity of persons themselves (i.e., the 'authentic self' and its actions) is a negotiation and assertion of the connections between individuals in a network of meanings and relationships. In both cases the utility of authenticity is based upon the sociocultural and psychological 'work' that it achieves, primarily some species of orientation. That is, authenticity in tourism is not simply the object of motivated 'pursuit'; it is a feature of the (inter)action between the tourist and the people and places visited. Principally, it is the experience of developing meaningful and appropriate ways to act in the (previously) unknown.

Experiences of, and claims about, authenticity signify often contested efforts made to form, maintain, legitimate—or, conversely, to undermine and delegitimate—*reciprocal connections* between material objects, people and places. These efforts to establish connections are not solely attempts to ease a personal, unpleasant experience of existential angst. Rather, they are efforts to orientate in material, cultural, and social worlds. Expressions of authentic experiences are signifiers of having found a new way (or ways) to be embedded within these previously unfamiliar worlds.

The contest over connectedness is also *intrapersonal* (i.e., 'connections' with one's true self) and thus generates the personal, existential sense of a 'battle' to claim one's authenticity through embeddedness in the world. This contest over connectedness means authenticity can be *both* personally experienced (as a meaningful and motivated effort and experiential achievement) *and* manifested in a collectively contested set of claims that spark the so-called "politics of authentication" inherent in the "social process by which the authenticity of an attraction is confirmed" ([Cohen & Cohen, 2012](#), p. 1296). To paraphrase the philosopher Ludwig [Wittgenstein \(1967\)](#), whether the target is the authentication of people, places and objects or of a personalized authentic 'Being' the impetus is to find the correct 'way to go on'. And, that 'way to go on' is not just an existential pursuit but involves navigating a world encountered as a material, social, and cultural reality. All forms of authenticity (i.e., its objective/materialist, constructivist, experiential/existential forms) combine in practical attempts to align the material, social, and personal/existential aspects of life. For tourists, this alignment is often serendipitous rather than planned—a feature of tourists' reports of their most valued and 'authentic' experiences ([Pearce, 1982](#)).

Before the analysis of authenticity in relation to tourism can be further elaborated, it is worth considering what is known about how authenticity is experienced in relation to places and objects, in general, and to oneself in interaction with others. To that end, we now consider the broader history of authenticity and its relation to heritage and cultural studies, authenticity as a modern concern and to our experience of our own activity (our 'authentic selves').

Authenticity in heritage and cultural studies

Theoretical and conceptual discussions of the notion of 'authenticity' in the tourism literature reflect the nature of related discussions of authenticity in other areas of research. This is particularly evident when it comes to understanding conceptualisations of authenticity in relation to places and objects. The distinction, for example, between objective and constructed understandings of authenticity in tourism ([Reisinger & Steiner, 2006](#); [Vidon et al., 2018](#); [Wang, 1999](#)) has been noted more broadly in studies of heritage and material culture. [Jones \(2010\)](#) speaks of the dichotomous nature of materialist versus constructivist accounts of authentic objects that have dominated considerations of heritage conservation and are embedded in Western philosophy, finding shortcomings with both (also compare [Lowenthal, 1992](#)). The former equates the authentic with identifiable, measurable, and objective characteristics (often immutable); the latter situates the authentic as a product of particular cultures or intersections between diverse cultures through which it is (conjunctly) constructed. A constructivist account therefore also blurs the distinction

between originals and copies, with authentic experiences (often conflated with experiences of the authentic) being as possible in the presence of reproductions as of originals.

It is worth following Jones' (2005, 2010) analysis for a moment as it exemplifies a broader approach in heritage studies (e.g., Bagnall, 2003; Jones, 2005; Smith, 2006). While some claim that a quest for authenticity is pointless and even sad (e.g., Lowenthal, 1992), Jones (2010) argues that this ignores the way people make use of the materiality of objects and places to cement social networks and relationships. Such use made of objects, according to Jones (2010), explains why the idea of authenticity is irrepressible in people's accounts of objects and places: material objects and sites are used to sustain practices and relationships that would be impossible to maintain otherwise. As MacCannell (1976) also noted, in a world of constant displacement and ever finer differentiation and fragmentation, the maintenance of these social networks and practices through the use of material anchors helps people negotiate their place in the world. Interestingly, even 'copies' gain an authentic nature in the lives of (local) people as they are materially connected with the narrative and history of a site (Bruner, 1994). That is, the authentic nature of material objects and places is inseparable from the experience and 'negotiation' people engage in as part of living with objects and within places. The materialist and constructivist accounts of the authentic thus merge as an object's or place's nature is reconceived. These accounts are not a static moment of origination that imbues an object or place with its authenticity but as an unfolding, material and historical narrative that incorporates and expresses human interactions. Put simply, 'inauthentic' replicas come to be seen as 'authentic objects' *in their own right*, having their own 'cool' authentication process. Hot becomes cool over time as the authentication process moves from a constructivist position to a more fixed objectivist interpretation. A 'reproduction' is itself a 'production' and, as the latter, is authentic to the extent it becomes part of this unfolding, materially-based narrative. The narrative may not lose its affective attributes over time but can gain a sense of 'objective permanence' through its material basis.

The emergence of authenticity as a modern concern

We will return to how this approach to understanding authenticity might help disentangle the concept's use in the tourism literature, and the tourist experience. But, first, we consider the origin of the notion of authenticity itself, including consideration of the social changes that have been assumed to underlie its emergence as a prominent concern. We then turn to the psychological and social psychological literature on the 'authentic self'. As we will explain, this focus stems from the hypothesis that the same social and economic processes that led to the emergence of authenticity as a central modern concern underpin the emergence of notions of the authentic self. Despite arguments that it predates modernity (compare Knudsen et al., 2016), the same changes have been argued to be responsible for the seeing personal authenticity as an *internal* property of individuals. In particular, we will discuss how personal authenticity came to be seen as involving an alignment between individuals' inner or 'true' selves and outward behaviour rather than as a matter of social performance and sincerity.

Following Trilling (1971), it has been suggested that the origins of our concerns with authenticity began with the (moral) need in the pre-modern era to regulate socially the increasing tendency to use deceptive practices of feigning and pretence. Moral sanctions against the temptations of insincerity naturally increased to provide some strictures to maintain honest social interactions in circumstances that were structurally unfriendly to them. This social (and moral) concern with sincerity then transformed, slowly, into a full-blown individualistic notion of authenticity as those same historical processes generated the modern notion of the individual (see Danziger, 1997 for a detailed account of the historical formation of selves). Individual people came to be seen as beings abstracted from the context of any particular social world (i.e., a non-theological notion of pre-social being). The uniqueness of individuals no longer arose from a web of social relationships but from deep within each individual: Personal 'essence' came to be located internal to the individual rather than as a relational, external property.

It was during the modernisation period that objects, like people, also came to be seen as having hidden essences that could be divined through extensive research, measurement, testing, and assessment. Private and collective collections and, soon, emerging museums and art galleries employed more and more refined technical methods of historical and physical investigation to ensure (and assure others of) the authenticity of a presented artefact or work of art, as has been well-traversed in the tourism literature (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999). In today's art and collectible markets, provenance remains key to assess value and authenticity, with history of ownership and transmission as relevant as the item itself – and yet itself prone to forgery (Salisbury & Sujo, 2010). The use of such technical practices of authentication have been criticised for the ways in which they make invisible the social practices and interests that elevate these supposedly authentic objects (and, for that matter, groups of people) to their privileged position and, thus, subordinate the supposedly less authentic, hybrid and impure objects. It is this suspicion and argument that has often underpinned calls for the complete abandonment of notions of the authentic and, specifically, objective authenticity (Lowenthal, 1992).

But we should not entirely reject the utility of authenticity as an explanatory and revealing concept because of its historical connection to essences. This would also make invisible the way in which people make use of the *consideration* of the authentic nature of objects (and places) to create and sustain the networks of relationship and activity between just these people, places and things. From such a perspective, the negotiation of authenticity is the negotiation of an embedded life that connects material objects to places and people through their participation in the activities that make up life. Hence, negotiation of the authenticity of material objects, according to Jones (2010, p. 189), is also a "means of establishing the authenticity of the self". It is in this way that Wang (1999) distinguishes the objective, constructed, and existentialist notions of authenticity that can be said to converge as aspects of this negotiation. This is because the activity of the negotiation of the authenticity of objects, people, and places is part of establishing an entire network of relationships by virtue of which the authenticity and reality of each to the other is

established. Wang (1999) argued that existential authenticity is more or less independent of objective or, even, constructed authenticity, thus radically *disconnecting* the outcome of authentication processes from existentially authentic experience. We, conversely, argue that existential authenticity is nevertheless dependent upon, and entwined with, the *negotiation* of the authenticity of these same objects, places and people—including the authenticity of oneself. Therefore, from this perspective, experiences of the authentic in tourism are also intimately connected to tourists' experiences of their own lives and selves as authentic. To explore this relationship in more detail, we now consider research into 'authentic selves' and their role and function in psychology.

Authentic and true selves

The belief that one should be true to oneself—be 'authentic'—has been a recurrent feature of western philosophy from Plato, via Socrates, to the injunction to "know thyself" (Pausanias, 10.24.1, 1918), to the Romantic transcendentalism of William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau through to the existentialist philosophies of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre (compare Rickly-Boyd, 2012 and Rivera et al., 2019).

Accompanying these insights was a corresponding sense that the (modern) social world actively suppresses some true (authentic) essence of personal and individual being. Martin Heidegger, for example, wrote of the vital attempt to avoid the 'they' (social and culturally normative meanings within which we have our existence) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously emphasised the need to act from inner motives rather than to respond to external forces (Vess, 2019). Humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow were similarly insistent that a high functioning life involved eschewing externally motivated goals and societal expectations while expression of true feelings and characteristics reveals one's true identity and self (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). The authentic life requires digging beneath the surface appearances that disguise one's true self.

Psychologists have most often focused on a 'psychologized' version of this sense of 'existential authenticity' (Wang, 1999), or one's sense of acting with genuineness, truth and fidelity to some inner core of being. While the psychological benefits associated with feeling—and being—authentic rose to prominence in psychology with the advent of the humanistic movement (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961) they have been confirmed by work on links between self-judgments of personal authenticity and well-being. Indeed, authenticity is now touted as one of the 'signature strengths' underpinning well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Despite advocacy for the importance of personal authenticity—and echoing the difficulties with the concept of authenticity in tourism research—it has been frequently noted that the concept of authenticity "though valued, is elusive", and "rigorous psychological inquiries into the concept of authenticity ... have proved difficult" (Hicks, Schlegel, & Newman, 2019, p. 3); that, despite much devoted research effort, "authenticity remains a problematic concept" (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019, p. 133) and that authenticity research "is plagued by ambiguous and conflicting concepts, slippery and unconvincing methods, and confounded findings" (Baumeister, 2019, p. 143). Just as in tourism studies, there is acknowledged practical importance in people's experiences of authenticity but conceptual and theoretical difficulties in the use of the notion.

Nevertheless, and as Hicks, Schlegel, and Newman (2019) summarise, there is good evidence that, despite all these conceptual pitfalls, people (a) value authenticity in their own behaviour, that of others and elsewhere (e.g., in consumer and life experiences, which include tourism experiences); (b) that self-judged authenticity is consistently positively associated with psychological well-being (even being in a positive mood can make one feel more authentic—Lenton et al., 2013); and (c) that authentic selves are often judged in positive moral terms (i.e., authentic selves are considered to be fundamentally 'good'). In fact, even the behaviour of others is seen as authentic the more it aligns with one's own moral values (Newman et al., 2014).

The question of personal authenticity

An objective definition of personal authenticity has been conceptualised in several ways but often includes some notion of congruence between outward behaviour and the nature of an authentic, true self (e.g., Rogers, 1961). But there are problems with this attempted objective characterisation. Many researchers, for example, have concluded that, in fact, no such stable inner true self exists (Baumeister, 2019; Schlegel et al., 2011; Schlegel et al., 2013; Strohminger et al., 2017). Without its existence, it is of course impossible to establish congruence between the true self and behaviour.

Further, much psychological research suggests that people's "self-perceptions are partial, selective, and biased" (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019, p. 135). A good deal of behaviour, for example, is thought to arise from nonconscious processes (e.g., Kahneman, 2011) which, by definition, are outside awareness. These are either intrapersonal processes (e.g., 'implicit cognition') or a variety of situational factors that, unnoticed by individuals, affect how they act. A consequence of this wide-ranging finding is that knowledge of the true self, even if such a self does exist, would be problematic to verify—even for the individual concerned—since they systematically err in their self-perceptions. Bluntly, they are highly unlikely ever to gain an accurate account of their true self.

Instead, people "tend to see their own true selves as virtuous" (Newman et al., 2014, p. 203) despite the obvious point that acting non-virtuously is a capacity that almost all people share. Put simply, people perceive themselves to be acting authentically when they act in ways that are generally understood to be positive rather than negative, especially in moral terms. This means that it is when people conform to normative judgments of correct, moral behaviour that they are most likely to experience themselves as acting authentically and in alignment with their true selves. Such a finding is counterintuitive to the widely held belief that authenticity often involves resisting normative prescriptions as to how one should act, as argued by existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger and psychologists such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Richard Ryan, and Edward Deci.

These difficulties have led some researchers to focus on subjective experiences or feelings of being authentic rather than assuming that authenticity is based on behavioural congruence or consistency with a 'true self'. While the authentic self may be 'fictional' it nevertheless can have important psychological consequences (e.g., Baumeister, 2019; Rivera et al., 2019). According to Rivera et al. (2019), for example, feelings of having a true self can act as a guide for how to act in the social world ('True-Self-As-Guide' – TSAG). This approach suggests that people value expressing their 'selves' and "accept a lay theory that following one's true self is an effective way of navigating uncertain situations and approaching the elusive 'good life'" (Rivera et al., 2019, p. 117). In this, affect ('feeling') is important as it connects individuals to places (see Carter, 2019) and the experience of 'auras' (Buchmann et al., 2010; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Tellingly, the ability to interact closely with the object seems more important to people than the degree of objective authenticity (Sarial-Abi et al., 2020).

Importantly for our analysis, Rivera et al.'s (2019) account suggests that there are cultural and social origins both for the sense of an authentic self and for the imperative to be guided in life by such a notion. While there may be no ontologically present 'true self' there are cultural and social processes behind its widespread acceptance, and it is these processes that result in the practical import of the notion of authenticity in people's lives (including in tourism). From this perspective it becomes easier to understand some of the counterintuitive and perplexing findings about personal authenticity. It is no surprise, for example, that people report feeling authentic when acting in socially acceptable or desired ways or that the sense of being authentic is widely taken to be synonymous with acting in a morally 'good' manner. In other words, feelings of authenticity signal whether they are living up to a shared cultural value and understanding of what it means to live a good life. Given such an understanding of the importance of the concept of authenticity, all that is left is to apply these lessons to the concept as used and debated within tourism studies.

Prospects for authenticity in tourism studies

Conceptually, authenticity can be understood epistemologically (i.e., *knowing* what is real or true) or ontologically (i.e., *being* 'true' or authentic). But whether it is a case of knowing the reality of a visited place (or object, or people) or of having an authentic experience in that place, a tourist is always engaged in an activity, a process. In the context of considerations of authenticity, how might this activity best be understood? What aspect of tourist activity might entail some consideration of authenticity?

A starting point is to note that 'authentication' is not just a process applied (in either 'cool' or 'hot' ways – Cohen & Cohen, 2012) to objects, people, culture and places. It is also a process that each tourist (and person) applies to their ongoing experiences (we can make attempts to 'authenticate' our own experiences). Further, we have argued that the experience of authenticity involves connections, especially an experienced reciprocity of connections between the tourist and the place visited, the people (and their practices) encountered, or the objects (that are subject to the tourist gaze). This experience of reciprocity is what explains notions of 'embodied', performative authentic action. The tourist feels both themselves and, for example, the place (or object, practice, or people) as 'authentic' and experiences a 'connection' when an embodied and affective performance can be entered into. The place is experienced as real in the only way anything is experienced as real: when a way of encountering it and interacting with it reciprocally presents itself. The possibility of reciprocal activity underlies the experience of meanings.

Connections make themselves evident principally through the opportunities of action they afford (similar to Heidegger's 'possibilities' opened up by one's heritage and a group's destiny, but perhaps more prosaic than those). That is, they arise out of 'ways to go on'. These ways can vary. Specifically, 'knowledge' of a place, people, cultural practice or object provides cognitive and behavioural ways to proceed in relation to them. A tourist dutifully stands in front of the Eiffel Tower and gazes upon it for a while because the tourist knows that the structure is 'essential Paris' for a tourist—the 'real' (tourist) Paris. What personal experience a particular tourist might report when gazing in this way could range from boredom through detached attention to intellectual interest. Nevertheless, there is some 'appreciation' (as Cohen & Cohen, 2012 phrase it) of the Tower as an authentic experience because the tourist knows what to do with it (visit it, look at it, take photographs of it, talk about having visited it, etc.). The authentication process is 'cool', as is the experience.

By contrast, what has been called in the tourism literature experiential or existential authentic experience involves quite a different experience of 'ways to go on'. That experience is as if all of those ways of possible (reciprocal) action in the setting are presented in a moment of full apprehension. The totality of the object, for example, 'speaks to us' or is seen in its entirety. This is the Benjaminian notion of 'aura' that involves the experience of a reciprocal, intersubjective gaze: "the reciprocity of one's gaze" (Rickly-Boyd, 2012, p. 275). To use the Eiffel Tower example again, a tourist may look upon it and it looks back in a way that seemingly expresses its history, its cultural uses, its engineering wonder, its aesthetic beauty, all in a single moment of encounter. The 'real' Tower reveals itself to and through the tourist and does so as an experienced entirety (all that it is). The authentication process that comes from this encounter is 'hot'. Yet, while the 'cool' experience of the Tower involves *knowledge* of particular (cognitive and discursive) ways to go on in relation to it, the 'hot' experience of the Tower involves an *expressive* encounter with the multitudinous ways in which it could, intersubjectively, interact with the tourist.

The significance of application

These two versions of authenticity are reminiscent of Wittgenstein's (1967, P.I. 138–142) consideration of two ways of determining meaning. One way that meaning can be determined, involves a word's use over time. We understand the meaning of a word to the extent that we can use it correctly, in conventionally appropriate ways. A second way to determine meaning, however, involves the meaning of a word experienced as being 'grasped in a flash' (e.g., when someone says 'bank' a whole range of meanings related to it *appear* to inhere in the word and feel as if they are both expressed and apprehended instantaneously). The

problem is that the two ways of determining meaning can appear to clash. How can something ('meaning') that is determined over time (in practice) also be something that can be apprehended *all at once*? The former way requires the test of practice—understanding the meaning of a word is underwritten by what is indeed *done* over time by the person who purportedly understands it. The latter way of determining meaning is when all the possible and particular meanings of a word expresses itself to the experiencing person simultaneously. This meaning is akin to the way an expression on a face presents, in a moment, a complexity of meanings or even an entire life story, 'pictured' all together. The world is encountered as an *expressive* phenomenon.

Wittgenstein resolved this apparent conflict by considering an intermediate case: an application. A builder's blueprint requires a trained and practiced builder to follow (apply) correctly what is presented 'all at once' in the blueprint (at least to the trained eye). Similarly whatever comes before our minds when we 'grasp the meaning of a word in a flash' requires someone who has already been trained in how to apply the word (correctly). In other words, one who is able to interact with the word correctly and in accord with the meaning (i.e., all the possible uses of the word) that is experienced as being 'grasped'. Something (e.g., the blueprint) is only meaningful for someone already trained in its use. There are rough parallels here with the semiotic approach of Peirce (1958) and its application to tourism (e.g., MacCannell, 1976; Metro-Roland, 2011). American pragmatist Charles S. Peirce divided signification into the sign (with its element of the 'representamen'), object (what is signified), and interpretant (the understanding we have of the relation between a sign and its object). This triad appears to map, roughly, onto Wittgenstein's analysis. The sign is the word or, in our example, the builder's blueprint and the interpretant is, roughly, the word's use over time (Peirce mentalizes or psychologizes the interpretant as 'understanding', which Wittgenstein avoids). Wittgenstein's resolution through the focus on 'application' (a way to employ a word, blueprint, etc.) provides a template for resolving accounts of authenticity in tourism (also compare Thomsen & Vester, 2016).

Encounters of the authentic

As noted, many reports of authentic tourist experiences include a serendipitous 'opening up' of a place (or local people) to the tourist (Pearce, 1982). In MacCannell's (1979) terms, such experiences are felt as authentic because tourists perceive that they have accessed the 'back-stage'. In our analysis, these experiences can be reinterpreted as the discovery of new, often unforeseen and unexpected, ways of interacting with the place and it is this confrontation with new 'ways to go on' that strikes the tourist as the discovery of the authentic place. While visiting a town a tourist may stumble upon a back street that leads to a local, neighbourhood market. As a result, the place, unbidden, reveals more of itself to the tourist and the possibility of new and more complete ways and modes of engagement with the place. The market is experienced as authentic—and as a site for an authentic experience—not principally because it is known to be 'off the beaten tourist track'. Instead, the discovery and revelation of the market allows the tourist to engage in new 'ways to go on' in the place, yet ways that may also be familiar to the tourist simply as a person (e.g., buying vegetables for dinner). The tourist not only experiences the *place* as authentic because of this discovery but also experiences *themselves*, as a result, acting authentically, more fully. That is, they have discovered ways to embed themselves that go beyond the activities of being a tourist.

At the heart of encounters with the authentic, we argue, are acts of discovery made through action but also that lead to opportunities for (inter)action. This action-based analysis can integrate various conceptualizations of authenticity. Objective/ materialist approaches can be understood as legitimating particular material objects, places, and so on as places to enact the 'ways to go on' implicit in being a tourist—they establish the legitimate targets for the tourist 'gaze' or 'performance'. Relatedly, constructivist approaches explicitly address the way in which these opportunities for tourist activity are created out of the contested activities of those who have an interest in the outcome of the 'politics of authentication'. That is, the action-orientation of constructivist approaches with their emphasis on the dynamism and shifting nature of what is deemed 'the authentic' directly incorporates action as underpinning authenticity given the requirement of constant construction and re-construction of authenticity. Finally, existential accounts of the subjective experience of authenticity in tourism can be interpreted as encounters with the *possibilities* of action unique to the individual, in a Heideggerian analysis (e.g., Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). However, as has been discussed, work on the 'authentic self' in psychology suggests that when those individual possibilities of action align with culturally grounded preferences an experience of acting authentically is most reliably reported. A culture that prescribes 'acting authentically' in effect elevates authenticity to a primary feature of one's 'desired reputation'.

Understanding authenticity in relation to the discovery of 'ways to go on' also provides useful insight into existential accounts of alienation. In Knudsen et al.'s (2016) Lacanian analysis, authenticity is depicted as a 'fantasy' generated by the creation of the 'Subject' and its inherent separation from the 'other'. From our perspective, that experience of alienation is the experience of a lack of 'ways to go on' in one's life as a 'Subject'. All else is 'other' and, hence, fundamentally alien. And the pain of this experience can only be relieved by the paradoxical lure of *jouissance*.

Yet, if we are correct, there is one escape from this supposedly inevitable alienation. Alienation ends when the 'other' is encountered as, itself, a 'Subject'. By being encountered as a 'Subject', the other presents reciprocal 'ways to go on'. Subjects were made for each other—they are intimately familiar with how to go on with each other because they are generated by those very possibilities of intersubjective reciprocal interaction. In fact, the one thing that is 'real'—or authentic—to a 'Subject' is another subject. This way of understanding alienation, and how it is overcome, also helps to explain the experience of 'aura'. The aura of an object (or landscape, place, cultural ritual, etc.) is the encounter of the object as a 'Subject'. In terms of the current analysis, what is it to encounter another 'Subject'? In the case of encountering others as 'Subjects', what we encounter is something (the other person) that has its own possibilities of action, its own 'ways to go on'. Our reaction, in its most profound form, to such an encounter with objects and places is to be confronted with the wonderful familiarity of the reality of this 'other' experienced as

'Subject'. Of course, most tourists will not have such a profound encounter with the places, objects or people they encounter while touring. But occasionally they may and, when they do, the sense of an authentic experience will be overwhelming ('hot').

In tourism, perceptions of (existential) authenticity emerge as prominent features of the experiences of tourists which rely on intrapersonal sources (e.g., physical sensations) and interpersonal sources (e.g., family ties and tourist communities) (Castéran & Roederer, 2013). Furthermore, embodiment and performativity are key ingredients (Buchmann et al., 2010; Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Månsson, 2010) with participants' conceived corporeal and sensorial involvements being crucial components of the overall experience of authenticity in tourism settings (Mura et al., 2016). Such insights into authenticity have been acknowledged for years within tourism studies and, in practice, are exemplified in how the experience economy acknowledges and favours spaces that "become stages in which experiences are enacted, performed and valued" (Rickly & McCabe, 2017, p. 55).

Similarly, in tourism, experiences of authenticity are expressions of connectedness. The connection may be achieved through the embodied performance of mediatized presentations of places (e.g., Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Månsson, 2010) or through continued processes of social and discursive negotiation. However they are achieved, authentic experiences express the value of a harmonized, interactive connection between the tourist's acts and the other phenomena that go to co-create a tourism experience in a place and with others.

To summarise, the question of authenticity seems to arise as a matter of connections. In terms of heritage, for example, authenticity can be experienced and understood as part of the 'negotiation' of the connectedness of objects, people and places. Similarly, the authenticity of persons (the 'authentic self' and its actions) is a negotiation of the connections between individuals within a network of meanings and relationships in the social and cultural world. In both cases, to dismiss the utility of the concept of 'authenticity' would be to ignore or miss the crucial sociocultural and psychological 'work' that is being done. Experiences of, and claims about authenticity are signposts of vital, even if contested, performative efforts made to form, maintain, legitimate-or, conversely, to undermine and delegitimize-connections between material objects, people and places.

Conclusions

We have argued for the continued usefulness of the concept of authenticity in tourism studies. To that end, our analysis sought to disentangle the concept's problematic nature. We began with reflections on how the authenticity of objects can be understood as a dynamic and evolving expression of a network of relationships between material objects, places and people. The authenticity of an object is part of a continual 'negotiation' and performance that sustains networks of relationships that embed people, places, and objects together in the same world. By adopting such a stance, the ways in which people and communities sustain their relationships with place and the material world are foregrounded. That is, 'authenticity' can be understood less as a theoretical label that denotes the 'reality' or 'truth' about an object and more as a process for embedding objects-and people-within networks of relationship. However, identifying that claims about-and experiences of-authenticity involve 'connections' is only a starting point for investigation. Immediately, questions arise as to how, and to what, tourists feel connected. Are these connections epistemological or ontological/existential? Are they connections to the 'real' self, place, culture, or object? In a sense, authenticity is subjectively established and so has particular importance in relation to tourism marketing and tourist motivation and experience (Knudsen et al., 2016). Above all, we identified how performative aspects contribute to the perceived authenticity of visitors' experiences that are at least partially "spontaneous, existential and reciprocal relationships with their hosts in intimate tourism encounters" (Tiberghien et al., 2017, p. 287) in which emotional attachment matters (Teng & Chen, 2020).

We also discussed how this same process of the negotiation of the authentic is at work in the negotiation of authentic selves. Rather than understanding authentic selves and their associated feelings of authenticity as involving congruence of a person's behaviour with a 'true' self, it can be seen as the way that an individual person 'negotiates' a network of (social) relationships that embed them within a society and culture. Feelings of authenticity guide a pragmatic process of incorporating persons into a social world. Tossing the concept of 'authenticity' out of our understanding of how people experience themselves because of its problematic status would make invisible this social psychological process.

This article has demonstrated the concept of authenticity as a significant (i.e., 'signifying') process, negotiated in different relationships, whether it is with an object or a social network. The aim of that process is to connect and embed tourists with the places, people and objects they tour. A final point worth emphasizing is that through maintaining discussion of, and research into, the experience of authenticity in tourism contexts, tourism studies can contribute to a far more general discussion of how humanity can have the experience of being re-embedded in the world. People are tourists for only very short periods of time. Being a tourist is not a discrete and entirely separate activity. The embedded nature of authenticity within the tourist experience therefore occurs within the human experience more generally but perhaps manifested most clearly in tourism. By adopting this embedded account, the concept of authenticity can remain relevant for tourism researchers, practitioners and tourists alike. For tourists, expressions of authenticity signify the embedded quality of their experiences, encounters and self in touristic contexts. Practitioners can find further guidance into how to produce quality, valued tourist experiences. And, for tourism researchers, the concept reveals the operation of key social and cultural processes and discourses taking place in which individuals seek to orientate themselves – and in which the theorist is a part. Thus, we argue that authenticity should remain as a key concept in tourism research.

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Statement of contribution

1. What is the contribution to knowledge, theory, policy or practice offered by the paper?

This article achieves a significant and new contribution to the social scientific analysis of the notion of authenticity (and related notions) as they apply to tourism research and practise. The paper demonstrates the continuing relevance of the notion of authenticity in understanding tourism and tourist behaviour and motives. Yet, in theory, the concept remains a contentious, complicated and disputed construct. However, by considering this discussion of the concept of authenticity in areas beyond tourism studies we can disentangle the difficulties the same concept often creates in understanding experiences in tourism.

As a consequence, we argue that authenticity can shed its problematic dualism by exploring how it is used in theorising and the activities of tourism.

2. How does the paper offer a social science perspective/approach?

This paper is a social science paper as the discussion is firmly set in the social science discourse; in particular, the central discussion of authenticity and sincerity draws upon the on-going debate in recent back issues of the *Annals of Tourism Research* journal.

The article is based on the results of a social science research literature review that focusses on published social science works to further investigate the meaning of authenticity in tourism research and practise, which it understands as a complex concept and phenomenon.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors do not have any financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work.

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