AUTHENTICITY AT GETTYSBURG

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ABSTRACT
Notwithstanding its potential value for consumption, authenticity has been criticized as a "problematic concept." Our ethnography at Gettysburg National Military Park indicates that, while consumers welcome staged authenticity, they are not actively searching for it. Instead, visitors appreciate authenticity as a means to an end: perceived site authenticity is a powerful time machine that connects consumers with the past. In this role, it functions as a mediating concept that triggers consumer imagination. This conceptualization provides a link between authenticity as a feature of the product and the intangible virtues resulting from the consumers' passionate engagement with a profound cultural narrative.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Authenticity in the marketplace is frequently met in multiple consumption expressions: art, museum artifacts, ethnic food and restaurants, old downtown renovations, collectibles, retro-style objects (Brown 2001), and leisure experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Costa and Bamossy 2001). As a theoretical concept, however, authenticity is still in the early stages of its conceptualization. A relatively small number of scholarly works has already appeared in anthropology, geography, and tourism. Nevertheless, academic work on authenticity remains vague both in terms of its definition and in its marketing relevance. As Bruner (1994) has noted, authenticity takes multiple forms and thus we can only unpack its meaning by analyzing the context and the specific instance it is used each time.

Consumer researchers have only recently started to investigate authenticity at a theoretical level, relevant to consumption practices. Nevertheless, it still remains a “problematic concept” (Costa and Bamossy 2001). The initial problem consumer researchers are facing is to define what meanings authenticity takes in different consumption contexts. Existing literature on authenticity underscores managerial concerns at the expense of a consumer perspective. With few exceptions (Bagnall 1966; Belk and Costa 1998; McIntosh and Prentice 1999), the majority of the existing studies overemphasize managerial strategies and the steps taken to offer an authentic product, ignoring consumer perceptions of authenticity. The present paper is focused on the concept of authenticity and its interplay with consumption in heritage sites. In this context, our study extends previous efforts to understand the meaning of authenticity from the consumer perspective (Chronis and Hampton 2005) by focusing on the theoretical relevance of perceived authenticity for the consumption payoff.

Ethnographic research was conducted at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one of the most significant and popular heritage sites in the United States, visited by almost two million people a year. Data collection was accomplished primarily through in-depth personal interviews with visitors at Gettysburg during the summer of 2002. This method was supported by photo-elicitation and personal observation. Visitors were asked to comment on both their experiential consumption benefits and on those aspects of the site that they found particularly involving, captivating, significant, or characteristic of the historical events. Overall, fieldwork at Gettysburg resulted in a total of 75 interviews, 238 photographs, and hundreds of hours of observation. Transcribed interviews offered more than 500 pages of verbal data.

As expected, authenticity was brought up by visitors in multiple occasions, articulating each time different meanings. In this paper we distinguish between authenticity as a characteristic of a heritage site or, in other words, as a “product” feature, and authenticity as an experience. First, as a product feature, authenticity takes one out of five types: object-related, factual, locational, personage, and environmental. Second, in terms of its reference to the consumption experience, authenticity illuminates our theoretical understanding of consumers’ connection with the past. Indeed, the most outstanding experiential outcome for a great number of visitors at Gettysburg was a temporary but profoundly intense imaginary flight in the past. As our data show, all five types of site-authenticity bequeath value to the heritage experience at Gettysburg and they help visitors connect with the past.

In recent years, various scholars expressed a modernist anxiety in the form of “kitschy imitations” (Gable and Handler 1996), pseudo-events (Boorstin 1964), and “hyperreality” (Baudrillard 1983; Eco 1986), that underscores managerial effort to “stage” authenticity (MacCannell 1999) and consumers’ drive to discover it. Our research shows that authenticity, indeed, might be a concern for consumers during their experiences in the marketplace. Instead of the consumers being preoccupied with authenticity though, our findings show that this is not the case. Rather than being actively engaged in a search for authenticity, visitors at Gettysburg appreciate authenticity as a means to an end: perceived site authenticity is a powerful time machine that connects consumers with the past. In this role, perceived authenticity functions as a mediating concept that triggers consumer imagination. The conceptualization that we offer provides a link between authenticity as a feature of the product and the intangible virtues resulting from the consumers’ passionate engagement with an outstanding cultural narrative.

While existing literature suggests that people engage in acts of imagination and the “suspension of disbelief” in order to attain a certain level of authenticity for the whole or parts of the product offering (Costa and Bamossy 2001), our insight at Gettysburg suggests that the reverse can be also true. Instead of having acts of imagination being responsible for the product authentication, perceived authenticity of the product can trigger consumers’ imagination and transport them in narrative worlds.

Our research also provides guidance for the appropriate “staging” of authentic sites in both substantive and communicative terms (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998). While object-related, locational, and environmental forms of authenticity can be used for the substantive staging of the built environment (authentic artifacts, actual locations, authentically-looking environments), all types of authenticity can be used for the appropriate communicative staging of a consumption experience (through their incorporation into the heritage narrative).

In short, our research shows that in Gettysburg’s stimulating context, visitors employ authenticity in its multiple forms as a signifier of a heroic past and as a vehicle for their imaginative engagement in a holistic and multisensory hedonic consumption experience.

REFERENCES


