Consuming Authenticity At Gettysburg

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While there is increasing evidence for the significance of authenticity in everyday consumption practices, the marketing literature is still lacking a full understanding of the concept of authenticity and the role that this plays in consumers’ experiential consumption. In this paper we study the concept of authenticity as a characteristic of Gettysburg, one of the most significant heritage sites in the United States. Findings reveal that authenticity at Gettysburg can be expressed in five different forms: object-related, locational, personage, factual, and environmental. From a theoretical standpoint, our data show that perceived authenticity of the site strengthens consumers’ connection with the past, which is a major consumption payoff for visiting a historic destination.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is true that authenticity pervades everyday consumption in multiple ways: in art, museum artifacts, ethnic food and restaurants, old downtown renovations, collectibles, myriad of retro-objects (Brown 2001), and most emphatically, tourism experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Costa and Bamossy 2001). While relevant discussions thrive in anthropology, geography, and tourism, consumer researchers have only recently recognized authenticity’s potential to augment product value above and beyond its promising functional, aesthetic, or experiential significance.

Notwithstanding its potential value for consumption experiences, authenticity has been criticized as a “problematic concept” (Costa and Bamossy 2001). Academic work on authenticity remains vague both in terms of its definition and in its marketing relevance. As Bruner (1994) says, “The problem with the term authenticity, in the literature and in fieldwork, is that one never knows except by analysis of the context which meaning is salient in any given instance” (p. 401). On top of these limitations, 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 management’s 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 aims to provide a better understanding of what is meant by consumers when authenticity arises. The question raised, therefore, is, if authenticity is an important element of contemporary consumer culture as has been asserted, in what sense is it prevalent in the context of a heritage site? A major objective of this study is to examine in which ways authenticity plays out in a heritage site. This goal includes (a) the study of the meanings of authenticity for consumers, (b) how it is articulated, and (c) what is its relationship with the consumption outcome(s).

Ethnographic research conducted at Gettysburg—the place of the bloodiest battle during the American Civil War—provides insight into the diverse forms in which authenticity is brought up by visitors as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site. Namely, our data reveal that five types of authenticity are seen by visitors as valuable as a characteristic of the commercial site.

Object-related authenticity refers to the authenticity of various tangible objects. It may be objective or constructive. Original artifacts are objectively authentic, while imitations, reproductions, or replicas may be constructively authentic. While for some visitors a special value is bestowed upon original cannons from the time of the battle (1863), “authentic replicas” are not discredited from their value as signifiers of sacrifice and patriotism.

Factual authenticity refers to the historical accuracy of the past events presented by the site management. It is a general belief among visitors at Gettysburg, that to a large extent, the past that is presented to them is factually authentic. Their inference is based on a comparison between their existing familiarity with the epic battle narrative and the history that is presented at the site by the National Park Service and the private businesses.

Locational authenticity refers to the actual place or the exact location where a particular historical event took place. As opposed to various contrived presentations of the past that might seem superficial and be scoffed at, the actual location of the battlefield and the exact spot where someone fought are greatly valued. For most visitors, simply “being there” is valued as a significant experiential payoff.

Personage authenticity refers to actual people who have lived, acted, and died at a heritage site. These are the heroes of the Gettysburg campaign and the participants in a legendary war narrative of paramount national importance because of their sacrificial contribution.

Environmental authenticity refers to the appearance of the surrounding environment. It can be distinguished in references to (a) natural environment, (b) lack of intervention, and (c) lack of commercialization.

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. 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 product offered at Gettysburg and they help visitors connect with the past.

REFERENCES


