

Perception of Authenticity in World Heritage Historic Centers - The case of French tourists

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ABSTRACT

There is a clear ‘cult of authenticity’, at least in modern Western society (Assi, 2000). So, there is a need to analyze the tourist perception of authenticity, bearing in mind the destination, its attractions, motivations, cultural distance, and contact with other tourists (Kohler, 2009). Our study seeks to investigate the relationship among cultural values, image, sense of place, perception of authenticity and behavior intentions at World Heritage Historic Centers. From a theoretical perspective, to our knowledge, no study exists with a focus on the impact of cultural values, image and sense of place on authenticity and intentions behavior in tourists. The intention of this study is to help close this gap.

A survey was applied to collect data from tourists visiting two World Heritage Historic Centers – Guimarães in Portugal and Cordoba in Spain. Data was analyzed in order to establish a structural equation model (SEM). Discussion centers on the implications of model to theory and managerial development of tourism strategies. Recommendations for destinations managers and promoters and tourist organizations administrators are addressed.

KEYWORDS: World Heritage Historic Centers, cultural tourism, authenticity perception, cultural values, behavior intentions.

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Introduction

Tourism is a social phenomenon that happens at a specific location (Poria, Reichel & Biran, 2006). A place can correspond to an intense personal experience which evokes memories with specific meanings (Herbert, 1996). Cultural tourism is a kind of tourism motivated by the desire to experience places: the authentic natural, historic and cultural resources of a community or region (NCDOT, 2000). Nowadays cultural tourism in World Heritage Sites is an important market especially to urban tourists. The search for authenticity reflects the needs of urban tourists from industrial countries; when these people travel, they seek something outside their daily lives, something innovative and different, an escape (Pauchant, 2006). They want to experience new things and enjoy the sensation of being where things are real and original. They want to be able to say “I was there”. The importance of authenticity in sustainable tourism is clear: “Authenticity is synonymous with tourism that is done well” (Pauchant, 2006).

An effective way of addressing research is to understand some features of cultural tourists in World Heritage Sites, their motivations, behaviors and desired experiences (Pedersen, 2002). This study tries to analyze an important experience and feeling to cultural tourists – authenticity perception. Future tourists will desire an authentic rather than false experience because they will be better educated, more sophisticated, globally aware and environmentally conscious (Yeoman, Brass & McMahon-Beatie, 2007). The search for authenticity and difference becomes essential to make World Heritage Sites differentiated from any other tourism places and attractions (Turok, 2009).

A growing number of cities and regions are basing their tourism development strategies on the promotion of cultural heritage, and the number of cultural attractions is growing rapidly (Richards, 2005). In 2012, for the first time, the French tourists were the most visited Portugal. So, this study focused on an important market to European tourism industry. This market is difficult to quantify. Experts suggest that more research would help (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Authenticity as an evaluative judgment may enrich the understanding of tourist experience and behavior and serve for marketing management purposes (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Our aim is to analyze what influences the search for authenticity in cultural tourists visiting World Heritage Sites.

Theoretical framework

Over recent years, a great effort has been put into adapting cultural resources as products for tourism, in preparing heritage destinations, in expanding the range of museums and in strengthening the tourism's cultural dimension (Vinuesa & Torralba 2010).

Therefore, cultural tourism is a phenomenon of interdependencies and its relationship with historic cities is multifaceted, with both positive and negative aspects (Vinuesa & Torralba, 2010). In this research we try to analyze some issues that link cultural tourists with World Heritage Sites, namely, cultural values, image, sense of place, authenticity and behavior intentions, as follows.

Cultural values

Culture can be defined as the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a group's response to its environment (Hofstede, 1990). Many aspects of culture form patterns of beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, and social behaviors (Kim, 1998). Values are psychological variables that characterize people within the same culture. (Reisinger, 2009). Therefore, people with similar values belong to a similar culture. The values that permeate a culture are called "cultural values", and they inform about what is good or bad, right or wrong, true or false, positive or negative, and about what they like (Reisinger, 2009). Cultural values are powerful forces that shape perception and individual behavior (Triandis, 2000).

Image

Destination image is defined as "an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and global impression about an object or destination" (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, p.870). Or, in a more short way, as an global perception that a individual holds from a destination (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Bigné & Sánchez, 2001). This concept is identified as a key issue in the travelling decision making process (Um & Crompton, 1990; Woodside, Frey & Daly, 1989) and is associated with a subjective interpretation of tourists' feelings and believes towards a destination (Baloglua & McClearyb, 1999; Bigné & Sánchez, 2001).

The destination image perceived in the mind of the tourist is mediated by the person's identity – cultural background and social, personal and psychological characteristics (Govers & Go, 2005). Tourists develop both cognitive and affective responses and attachments to environments and places: the cognitive component refers to the appraisal of physical features of environments while the affective component refers to the appraisal of the affective quality of environments (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Several studies suggest that tourist's cultural values are preconditions to destination image (Kim & Prideaux, 2005; Kozak, 2002). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1 - Tourist's cultural values positively influence the World Heritage Historic Centers

a) cognitive image

b) affective image

Sense of Place

Sense of place refers to the emotional and physical bond that an individual has towards a place (Tapsuwan, Leviston & Tucker, 2011). It is a feeling that may be derived from the natural environment, but is more often made up of a mix of natural and cultural features in the landscape (Seddon, 1972). People develop a sense of belonging, identity, and dependence on certain places (Korpela, Hartig, Kaiser & Fuhrer, 2001).

The concept of place identity carries two different meanings: the first means a set of place features that guarantee the place's distinctiveness and continuity in time; the second means "genius loci", used to describe the impalpable but agreed upon unique character of a place (Lewicka, 2008). Place dependence, in contrast to place identity, refers to connections based specifically on activities that take place in an outdoor, recreational setting. It develops out of the fit between one's intended use of an area and the area's ability to adequately provide that use, especially relative to alternative sites. Place dependence is recognizable in the concept of resource specificity common in the recreation literature (Farnum, Hall & Kruger, 2005). Place memory can be measured by expressed interest in place history, place historical knowledge, and ethnic bias (Lewicka, 2008).

Recent research shows that the concept of sense of place facilitates the comprehension of leisure behavior (Su, Cheng, & Huang, 2011). Consequently, many studies have been done to determine what antecedes sense of place as an activity and leisure involvement (Kyle & Mowen, 2005) and destination image (Prayag & Ryan, 2011). Destination image is an antecedent of place attachment (Prayag & Ryan, 2011). It influences positively the attachment to a destination (Veasna, Wu & Huang, 2012), to international tourists (Prayag & Ryan, 2011) and residents that visit cultural sites (Hou, Lin & Morais, 2005). So, it is expected that a favorable image of a destination leads to a strong cognitive attachment to that destination (Veasna, Wu & Huang, 2012). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H2a - Cognitive image of World Heritage Historic Centers positively influence tourist's

- a) place identity*
- b) place dependence*
- c) place memory*

When tourists select some places and not others to visit, it is fairly obvious that some predictable factors - distance, accessibility, type of activities provided, destination image, or social influence - come to mind (Farnum et al., 2005). The new paradigm in tourism research emphasizes the understanding of emotional and symbolic subjective meanings associated with places and also the connection of people to those places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H2b - Affective Image of World Heritage Historic Centers influences positively tourist's

- a) place identity*
- b) place dependence*
- c) place memory*

A place can correspond to an intensely personal experience which evokes memories and allows them to be relived and acquire a specific meaning (Herbert, 1996). The main motivation for heritage tourists visiting a place is based on the heritage's characteristics of the place (Poria et al., 2006). Places that have genuine links with culture can develop them, with clear advantage for the place and its visitors. Cultural meanings and values of the tourist attach themselves to similar meanings and values of the place (Herbert, 1996). The relationship between the individual values and places has been mentioned as important in heritage management (Howard, 2003). Cultural tourists that visit cultural places have a sense of meaning or emotional attachment with them (Herbert, 1996). According to this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3 - Tourist's cultural values positively influence

- a) place identity,*
- b) place dependence*
- c) place memory*

In a tourism context, place dependence is described as visitors' functional attachment to a specific place and their awareness of the uniqueness of a setting, which contributes to meeting their visitation goals (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). "Urban reminders" the leftovers

from previous inhabitants of a place, may influence memory of places, either directly, by conveying historical information, or indirectly, by arousing curiosity, and increasing motivation to discover the place's forgotten past (Lewicka, 2008). People aware of the place's history express more interest in the place's past and in their own roots than people with fewer emotion bonds to a place (Lewicka, 2008).

This mode of being is based on events that happened during our life, one can develop a connection to a destination due to activities that he/she develops or to what the place itself symbolizes (Yuksel, Yuksel & Bilim, 2010). Or that took place before we were born and therefore belong to the history of the family, ethnic group, state, or the world (Lewicka, 2008). In the latter cases, what we remember depends not on personal experience but on oral traditions, cultural transmissions or own motivation to do the detective work in discovering the past (Lewicka, 2008). So, we advance the following hypothesis:

H4 - The tourist's place memory of World Heritage Historic Centers is influenced by

a) Place identity

b) Place dependence

Authenticity

Authenticity is a complex concept that is central in tourism research (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Authenticity can be approached in two different perspectives: object based (Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) and events considered as real and genuine (Steiner, Reisinger, 2006), and based on the touristic experience (Wang, 1999), like a human being's attribute meaning one's true essence (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

Image, as said before, is an important component of tourism destination marketing because it influences tourists' behavior by stimulating multiple creative activities and experiences (Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012). Image, as one of the most influential factors affecting tourist perception and consequent behaviors, is a mixture of various feelings about attitudes toward and ground for an overall evaluation of an object (Lee, O'Leary & Hong, 2002).

Heritage, tourism and authenticity become a powerful part of the destination image (Frost, 2006). Tourist may enter in World Heritage Sites with some predetermined conception encouraged by the area's destination image (Farnum et al., 2005). So, we advance the following hypothesis:

H5 - Tourist's perception of authenticity experienced at World Heritage Historic centers is influenced by

a) cognitive image

b) affective image

Values give some things significance over others and thereby transform some objects and places into heritage (Avrami, Mason & Torre, 2000). Labeling something as heritage is a value judgment that distinguishes that object or place from other objects and places for particular reasons, and as such, the labeling adds new meaning and values (Avrami, et al., 2000). An important characteristic of heritage is authenticity that identifies traditional cultures and their origins as genuine, real and unique, establishing a strong connection with the communities' heritage (Sharpley, 1994). The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories (ICOMOS, 1994). Typologies of tourist experiences have shown that the quest for authenticity on vacation is a function of stratification and emphasizes the multiplicity of personal identities (Waite, 2000). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H6 - Tourist's cultural values positively influence the perception of authenticity of the touristic experience on World Heritage Historic Centers.

Places involve meanings and values that facilitate intimate connections with particular geographical areas (Tuan, 1977). Especially in high-profile places/World Heritage Sites visitors may come to areas with preconceived notions of what their experience should consist of, and what types of encounters are needed in order to have an authentic experience (Farnum et al., 2005). So, we propose that:

H7 – Tourist’s perception of authenticity who visit World Heritage Historic Centers is positively influenced by

a) place identity

b) place dependence

c) place memory

Behavior intentions

The concept of human behavior is multidisciplinary and as a result it has different meanings in each discipline. In tourism, some concepts that define tourist behavior have been borrowed from several disciplines, such as from recreation, geography, urban and regional planning and education, among others (Reisinger, 2009). Behavior intentions in tourism refer to the set of tourists’ attitudes after their visit experiences. Thus, each distinct and favorable experience will positively influence future behavior, for example in the subsequent evaluation of the destination, the future intentions to return or to recommend the visited place (Bigné & Sánchez, 2001).

“Images guide and shape behavior” (Barich & Kotler 1991, p.95) providing a cue for information processing (Nadeau, et al, 2008). They are knowledge structures that can be used as mental short-cuts for processing information in decision-making processes (Kotler & Gertner 2002). Destination image exerts a significant influence on destination choice but also preconditions tourist destination behaviors and attitudinal consequences (Lee & Lee, 2009). So a broader conceptualization of image can show the way to greater understanding of touristic intentions on recommendations and on visiting it again (Nadeau, Heslop, O’Reilly, Luk, 2008).

Image of the destination positively affect an intention to revisit it in the future (Court & Lupton, 1997). The more favorable image of a destination, the higher the probability that the tourist will return and will recommend it (Bigné & Sánchez, 2001). Based on this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H8 - Behavior intentions towards World Heritage Historic Centers is positively influenced by

a) cognitive image

b) affective image

Authenticity is a subjective experience and deals not only with facts but also with myths and imagination (Jewell & Crofts, 2001). Authenticity as an evaluative judgment may enrich the understanding of tourist experience and behavior and serve for marketing management purposes (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Tourists’ authentic experiences are not “object-and-context-free” (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). So, cultural and heritage tourists are looking for experiences, based on the tangible remains of the past (Herbert, 2001). According to this, the following hypothesis is developed:

H9 - Tourist’s Perception of experienced authenticity positively influence the behavior intentions towards World Heritage Historic Centers.

A place can be valued by an individual because it is a good place to undertake a particular activity, or it is seen as special for emotional or symbolic reasons (Kyle & Mowen, 2005). Cultural and heritage tourists are looking for a sense of place, a connection to a place, with their traditions and customs (Jewell & Crofts, 2001). Sense of place is a significant predictor of skiers’ loyalty and allows establishing the intentions to return and recommend a specific touristic destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2011). A strong place attachment may lead to repeatedly returning to a special place (Farnum et al., 2005). In line with this, we can advance that:

H10 - Behavior intentions towards World Heritage Historic Centers is positively influenced by

a) place identity

b) place dependence

c) place memory

Cultures represent a complex whole of value systems that potentially affects tourists’ behavior intentions (Woodside, Hsu & Marshall, 2011). The background of each person provides them with different culture (Hofstede, 1994). So, understanding people means to consider their background, from which their present and future behavior can be predicted (Hofstede, 1994).

Values are related to decision making, further, there is evidence that values impact behavior (Parks & Guay, 2009). Some tourists like to travel to destinations that share the same cultural background, but the opposite is also true, cultural differences, rather than similarities, can also attract

tourists to different destinations (Hottola, 2004; Reisinger, 2009). In consequence, the tourist's culture influences and contributes to explaining the tourist's behavior (Reisinger, 2009). According to this we propose:

H11 - Cultural values positively influence behavior intentions towards World Heritage Historic Centers.

In sum, we propose the following model (Figure 1):

Figure 1 – Conceptual Model

Methodology

A survey was applied to collect data of French tourists, in two European historic centers, Guimarães in Portugal and Córdoba in Spain, classified by UNESCO as World Heritage Historic Centers. A structured questionnaire was developed and applied to collect data of French tourists, in two destinations classified by UNESCO as WHHC, Guimarães in Portugal and Córdoba in Spain. The data is composed by 400 questionnaires collected between July and August 2012. This final sample allowed us to have a proportion of 5 observations for each indicator - 78 variables (see Bentler, 1989 in Westland, 2010). The final model represents a 16:1 proportion - 24 observable indicators.

Measurement scales: 28 items were operationalized from Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov and Vinken (2008), 21 items of cognitive and affective image were operationalized from Kim and Richardson (2003); 15 items of sense of place were adopted from Williams and Vaske (2003) and Lewicka (2008); 10 items of experience authenticity were operationalized from Kolar and Zabkar (2010), Poria, Reichel and Biran (2006); 4 items of behavior intentions were adopted from Kolar and Zabkar (2010). The measured was based on a 5 point Likert scale – 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Results

The conceptual framework was simultaneously estimated in a structural equation model using FIML estimation procedures in LISREL 8.80. Specifically; this model contains five constructs, 24 observable indicators, measurement and latent variable errors, and intercorrelations between the latent constructs. This model has a chi-square of 585.56 (239 df, $p=0.00$); the fit indices suggest a good fit of the model to the data (NFI=0.91, NNFI=0.96, PNFI=0.81, CFI= 0.96, IFI= 0.96, RFI=0.93, RMSEA=0.060).

Several factors were eliminated from the conceptual model presenting Cronbach's alphas less than .65 and / or for revealing no significant values when were tested to incorporate the final model. The hypotheses relating the constructs fixed in the CFA model were tested. The following are the results (see Figure 2) through measures of standardized coefficients and t-values.

Figure 2. – Final Model

The hypotheses relating the constructs fixed in the CFA model were tested with significant results. After the CFA test the conceptual framework was simultaneously estimated in a structural equation model using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation procedures in LISREL 8.80. This model contains five constructs, 24 observable indicators, measurement and latent variable errors, and intercorrelations between the latent constructs. This model has a chi-square of 585.56 (239 df, $p=0.00$); the fit indices suggests a good fit of the model to the data (NFI=0.91, NNFI=0.96, PNFI=0.81, CFI= 0.96, IFI= 0.96, RFI=0.93, RMSEA=0.060). The following are the results (see Figure 2) through measures of standardized coefficients and t-values.

Discussion

This study tried to better understand what influences cultural French tourists' perception of authenticity and the future intentions to return or recommend the visit at World Heritage Historic Centers. The empirical investigation revealed that tourist's cultural values influences cognitive and affective image of World Heritage Historic Centers. Affective and cognitive image impacts sense of place, specifically place dependence and memory. An important conclusion of this study is that French tourist cultural values don't influence directly the experienced authenticity. Cultural values do influence authenticity indirectly through affective image. Behavior intentions are impacted by cultural values, sense of place and authenticity.

Our model gives an extended and integrated vision of what influences authenticity perception and behavior intentions. When marketers understand how cultural tourists react to authenticity, they can create more effective campaigns to influence consumers' expectations and decisions.

From a theoretical perspective, to our knowledge, no study exists with a focus on the impact of cultural values, image and sense of place on authenticity and behavior intentions. Now, that marketing researchers are challenged to provide research with practical implications, it is believed that this theoretical framework may be used as a basis to pursue service-oriented destination and business strategies.

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