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What does authenticity and neolocalism mean to craft brewery visitors? Insights from the Midwest and the Great Plains

Introduction

Craft beer, produced by small and independent brewers that are “distinctive, innovative, and typically involved in their communities” (Brewers Association, 2020), is becoming more widely consumed worldwide (e.g., the U.S., Knollenberg et al., 2021; U.K., Cabras & Bamforth, 2016; Nave et al., 2021). The number of craft breweries has grown rapidly during the past decade, with craft beer entrepreneurship (Alonso, 2011) generating increased economic activity in tourism locales throughout the U.S. (Feeney, 2017; Nave et al., 2021). The intensifying market competition in the craft beer sector (Kleban & Nickerson, 2012) has urged brewery owners/managers to strategically orchestrate brewery visitors’ experience and differentiate their offerings (Herrera, 2016). Previous craft beer marketing research found that in addition to beer quality, the degree a beer is perceived as local and authentic is essential for developing meaningful connections with their consumers (Belmartino & Liseras, 2020; Gomez-Corona et al., 2016; Jaeger et al., 2020) and ultimately key to the success of craft breweries (Nave et al., 2021). However, from brewery visitors’ perspective, it is still unclear what they consider to be local and authentic. Moreover, from the supply perspective, such an understanding is much needed for brewery owners/managers to cater to consumer needs, facilitate their on-site experience, and to survive in a competitive marketplace. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the meaning of authentic and local beer to craft brewery consumers.

Literature Review

Although authenticity has been a core concept in tourism scholarship, it is also one of the most debated, with various conceptualizations. For example, Wang (1999) delineated three types of authenticity including: 1) objective authenticity (used to judge an object as authentic/original or not, e.g., appellations of wine as a criteria); 2) constructive authenticity (constructed by tourists themselves in terms of imagery, expectations, preferences, e.g., consumers’ perceptions of beers based on its marketing claims, storytelling, or labels); and 3) existential authenticity (relating more to the consumer themselves than the object, e.g., the extent to which a brewery experience makes brewery visitors feel as being congruent with their true selves (Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022). Cohen and Cohen (2012) attempted to understand authenticity from the perspective of authentication (the process by which an object/experience can be rendered as authentic), while Le et al. (2021) proposed treating authenticity as an inter-relationship among providers, consumers, and experiences in the context of restaurant experiences. Regardless of the ongoing debate, many researchers agreed that authenticity is co-constructed by various actors (e.g., consumers, businesses themselves, Le et al., 2021; 2022; Rickly, 2022).

Still, limited research has addressed authenticity in relation to craft beer. Thurnell-Read (2019) has been the only study thus far that explores what authenticity means to brewery owners and managers as pertains to their products and beer production. Specifically, they conducted 40 in-depth interviews and identified six modes of authenticity: 1) procedural authenticity (related to the procedures by which their products were made); 2) material authenticity (of materials utilized, e.g., artisanal water for beer brewing); 3) geographical authenticity (the claimed location where manufacturing materials come from); 4) temporal authenticity (making references to either

tradition or time in a more specific way by stating particular time periods); 5) oppositional authenticity (based on opposing their products to in-authenticity of industrially made beer); and 6) biographical authenticity (related to the person making the product). While Thurnell-Read's (2019) study is insightful, it is unknown regarding the authenticity of craft beer from brewery visitors' perspective.

Earlier researchers also noted that craft breweries typically use local names and visual representations to emphasize the local nature of the products produced, and suggested its relevance with neolocalism (Shortridge, 1996), defined as "a conscious effort by businesses to foster a sense of place based on attributes of their community" (Holtkamp, et al., 2016, p.66). Oftentimes employed as a marketing strategy, neolocalism accentuates local elements of a local product compared to a generic product that is "foreign" or unattached to the geographic place in which the product is either produced or enjoyed. Within the craft beer industry, three key themes related to neolocalism were identified including serving as a driver of both the craft beer product and craft brewery experience, respectively, and the use of place-based themes for breweries to engender neolocalism (Nelson, 2021). Similar with research in craft beer authenticity, research examining the extent to which brewery visitors consume local (product, experience, place) related with neolocalism are at the inception stage. For instance, Nelson (2021) was among the first ones that looked into the role of neolocalism in brewery taproom visitors' experience, through analyzing their online reviews in the five largest urban areas in Texas. Taylor and DiPietro (2020) conceptualized neolocalism as consisting of three dimensions (i.e., use of local names/images in labeling and marketing, environmental sustainability, and social/community engagement) in examining brewery visitors' perceptions as associated with their satisfaction and trust in Charleston (South Carolina) and Asheville (North Carolina). Considering the amorphous nature of neolocalism, the construct is still conceptually and methodologically underdeveloped.

Methodology

To explicate the dimensionality of authenticity and neo-localism from the craft brewery visitors' perspective, this study took a qualitative approach, which consists of both (direct and participant) observation and interviews among brewery visitors. A research protocol was designed based on previous research (Mack et al., 2005) and distributed among researchers to guide the field research at craft breweries. The protocol includes: 1) eight general questions on direct observation of the breweries (e.g., what does the building of the brewery look like? Does it reflect the locality or have any signs/logos in sight?); 2) four categories on participant observation (including their physical and verbal behavior, e.g., pace of drinking, dynamics of interaction with others); 3) four interview questions surrounding authenticity and neolocalism (e.g., "in your opinion, what makes a brewery truly local?", "in your view, what makes a brewery authentic?"); 4) four questions on craft beer involvement (e.g., knowledge level on craft beer, visit frequency to craft breweries); and 5) three demographic questions (e.g., age, gender).

This study was conducted in the U.S. due to the proliferation of craft beer throughout this country (Gatrell et al., 2018). The convenience sampling method was adopted to include craft breweries where most of the research team reside (Missouri, Indiana, Oklahoma). The field research, spanning from September to early October 2022 (covering both weekday and weekends), was conducted on site at nine craft breweries. These craft breweries were all located in college towns, with the majority having been established within the past 10 years. Altogether 46 interviews were conducted among randomly selected craft brewery visitors in Missouri (n=16), Indiana (n=13),

and Oklahoma (n=17). Most interviewees were local visitors (72.3%), between 25-34 years old (37.8%), with basic knowledge of craft beer (57.1%), and visited craft breweries more than once a month (73.9%). The interviewees were split in terms of gender.

The researchers took a grounded theory approach and conducted thematic analysis, which allows them to better understand social processes, and individual and collective actions that take place during everyday life or in social settings (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). To ensure trustworthiness, researchers coded the interviews independently and met multiple times to discuss codes for possible merging and category finalization based on their internal relationships. All researchers are seasoned in qualitative analysis with some experience working with the wine or beer industry.

Results

In total, 37 codes emerged from the data which led to the development of nine major themes (Table 1). Craft brewery visitors' responses to the local and authenticity questions shared many overlaps and were summarized by each theme in the following paragraphs, with direct quotes.

Table 1. Major themes of craft brewery visitor experience

Theme	Axial codes
1 beer itself	(i)good taste/ quality of beer, (ii)unique beer, (iii)variety of beer
2 beer production	(i)visible brewing facilities, (ii)brew own beer, (iii)brew on site, (iv)sourcing of ingredients, (v)ways of making beer
3 brewery accessibility	(i)proximity, (ii)unique location/setting
4 brewery design	(i)local elements incorporated in décor, (ii)unique design
5 vibes of brewery	(i)pet-friendly, (ii)family vibe, (iii)unique vibe, (iv)relaxing vibe, (v)place to hang out/socialize, (vi)welcoming vibe, (vii)outdoor vibe
6 brewery services	(i)knowledgeable staff, (ii) friendliness of staff/service quality, (iii)interaction with brewery and others, (iv) relationship building, (v)specialization, (vi)being inclusive to all groups
7 brewery place identity	(i)local narratives, (ii)local landmark, rooted in local history, (iii)supported/consumed by locals
8 community engagement	(i)sense of community, (ii)partnership with local businesses, (iii)sponsor local organization (e.g., sports team, activity, festivals and events, (iv)partnering with other local business
9 local ownership	(i)independent (vs. corporate), (ii) small scale of business

The first key theme emerged from visitor interviews was related with the **beer itself**. Axial codes emerged related to *good taste & quality of beer*, *unique beer*, and *variety of beer (changing menu)*. Interviewees acknowledged the importance of *good taste* and *quality of the beer* in attracting them to visit the brewery in the first place. One interviewee explained,

“If it is good, it is authentic. I am a judge and home brewer; I have a great deal of respect for beers and understand that there are traditional methods of making beer as well as methods that make economic sense.”

Many noted their appreciation for the *specific, unique beer, or seasonal beers* made at the brewery. Another visitor added that “craft breweries should have beer that has a lot of flavor and taste, depth of flavor matters”. These visitors sought for “adventurous beer (not cookie cutter)”, as reflected in a comment that “I like to see beers I cannot pronounce. That means I want to try different types of beers with different tastes and ingredients”. In addition to the *variety of beer* or the *changing menu*, visitors value the *unique beer* served at the brewery as being key to their visits, as one interviewee added that “it needs to sell special beers, including some specific beer that is only offered in the location and nowhere else”. Many interviewees even provided specific examples of seasonal drinks and flavors they favored, such as pumpkin ale, pineapple beer, ginger beer, Christmas beer.

The production of beer was the second major theme that emerged. Axial codes include *sourcing of ingredient, brew own beer, way of making beer, visible brewing facility, and brew on site*. Many visitors were expecting to see beer-making facilities on site, as one described,

“... [the brewery] is a place where you can see that the beer is actually made and where you can see the beer-making equipment, so you know that the beer is done on the premises.”

Another visitor from a different brewery also commented,

“...[we like]brewery place where we can see the processing facilities. We’ve been to many breweries; in some places, we cannot see those brewing kettles. They are behind the wall and have a huge window. But, we like it if we can see what they are making and how, if it’s open to see.”

In addition to directly observing the beer-making process on site, brewery visitors cared about the beer ingredients. One underscored that he preferred being able to “know what we are tasting”, and it is important if “products are from around and (brewery) use local ingredients”.

Some experienced visitors were more tolerant regarding the beer production. For example, one commented that “if not brewed on site, the beer should be brewed in a facility that is not far away”. Another one loosened the specification of “local” for beer ingredients, as reflected in the response,

“It is not necessary for the ingredients to be local, but it makes more sense if the ingredients are sourced from this region of the USA.”

The third key theme of brewery **accessibility** consists of axial codes of *proximity and unique location/setting*. Interviewees noted “it needs to be close to where people live”. A couple who visited one brewery together added, “for us it is local, if it is close and there is only one location for this brand”. Locals interpreted brewery accessibility as either “within walking distance to my house” or located “in the heart of the community”, while out-of-town brewery visitors cared more if “the location is easy to get to, easy to find”.

The **design** of the brewery (containing two codes - *local elements in décor* and *unique design*) is another major theme that repeatedly brought up by brewery visitors. One interviewee raised the importance of decoration that,

“...décor that is reflective of the brewery and locality, local feel and touches, i.e., 1890 signs and beer for the year (the surrounding university) was established.”

A different visitor also articulated that “it is local when you are there and can recognize all the staff in the facility”, while to many others, the local and uniqueness in design is key to authenticity, as reflected in the response, “it is authentic because it has unique graphic design, the labels are unique and professional”.

Similarly, many also noted the *vibe* of the brewery is important to their craft brewery experience. Components of the vibe include “*cool*”, *relaxing, or welcoming ambience, pet-friendly, family friendly, with outdoor area, place to hang out or socialize, etc.*

“The relax and ‘chill’ vibes are important for the authenticity of a brewery because it is different than other breweries in downtown. I do not need to intentionally go for a drink at (this brewery), because it is more like a hangout place. Other breweries seem to be more intended for drinking only.”

In addition to the tangible aspects of the brewery, many interviewed visitors stated that it is *brewery services* that separate the specific craft brewery from other breweries/bars. Such services encompass *knowledgeable staff, friendliness of staff/service quality, conversation/interaction with the staff and others*, and *relationship building*. One interviewee explained,

“Staff with excellent beer knowledge but not intimidating, friendly. .. management interacts with customers (visible presence), .. with strong customer value and appreciation.”

Another couple of visitors noted,

“...the bartenders are friendly, we know the people who brew, they are passionate about the beer and are knowledgeable, rather than just serving it... and the environment is unique... There is no tension in the air, the vibe is chill.”

The last three major themes arose as essential to brewery visits for many interviewees. For example, the theme of *local ownership* defines a craft brewery regarding two codes of *independently owned* (vs. *corporate*), and *small scale of business*. One participant mentioned that “what makes this truly local is that it is locally owned”. Another participant added to that, noting (the brewery) “is in our neighborhood and owned locally”. The emphasis on local ownership from brewery visitors was closely related to their willingness to support local businesses. One brewery visitor explained,

“We like to support local business. Last year, when we were locked out, we buy beer specifically from here to support their business.”

Another echoed, “I like to support small business. I don't want it to be traded by the stock market”.

Along the lines of emphasizing the craft brewery being rooted in local areas, another key theme centered on the *place identity* of the brewery. Axial codes comprise *local landmark, local narratives*, and *being rooted in local history*. One interviewee felt proud about visiting the local brewery as a local resident, and she went on and explained,

“The brewery should have a story that is connected to the city where it was established. It needs to have artwork that is done by the local artists. ... Yes, because it is home-based, started in this city and it has its own identity as the city’s brewery.... There is a sense of special attachment to the city when visit (the brewery) here.”

Other interviewees also articulated that “...it is something about the history of the establishment and the founders. It can and probably should have been named after local landmarks” and suggested that breweries should “...have stories, like building that has history, community traditions that are being followed”.

The last theme is related with *community engagement*, encompassing axial codes such as *sponsoring local team/activity/organizations/events, sense of community, partnership with local businesses*, and *making beer for local events*. One couple of visitors noted,

“...in [this brewery], we do not know them personally, but the owners and their family are known among the community. This makes this place feel like part of the community.”

Another visitor to the same brewery also acknowledged the involvement of the brewery in the community, adding that, “Participating in festival or activities makes the brewery unique and more authentic for the participants”. An interviewee of a different brewery recognized how the brewery’s support for local event by commenting that “...[the brewery] is involved in community events... and have made a specific beer for a local event that is run every year.”

Conclusion and discussion

This study advances understanding of consumer craft brewery experiences from the perspective of authenticity and neolocalism. Specifically, the major themes and subthemes emerged from this study lined up with all six (but biographical) dimensions of authenticity identified in Thurnell-Read’s (2019) study among brewery owners/managers. For example, the theme on the *production of beer* (e.g., *sourcing of ingredient*, *brew own beer*, *way of making beer*) incorporates both procedural and material authenticity dimensions, the *place identity* theme aligned well with geographical authenticity, and the *beer itself* theme (specifically the *seasonal flavor/changing menu code*) paralleled with temporal authenticity. In addition, the *local ownership* theme aligned with descriptions of oppositional authenticity. Compared to Thurnell-Read’s (2019) study on brewery owners/managers, results from this research suggested that visitors were less sensitive to the brew makers/masters (as indicated by the absence of biographical authenticity), despite being mindful of the taste and quality of the beer. Furthermore, the theme of *beer production* is also consistent with the suggested authentication aspect of understanding authenticity from Cohen and Cohen (2012). On the other hand, the *place identity* theme and *community engagement* theme aligned well with dimensions suggested by Taylor and DiPietro (2020) of neolocalism. As shown by the direct quotes from visitors, these nine major themes and axial codes emerged from interviews were closely related/embedded with each other, with much convergence. For instance, visitors recognized the vibe of the brewery as seeming welcoming while experiencing the brewery service experience as being inclusive. This potentially denotes the degree of correlation between distinct but related axial codes as part of the holistic craft beer experience. Results from this study have also shed light regarding the degree of interconnectedness between authenticity and neolocalism, which were only implicitly suggested by previous literature. Future efforts should further explore the relationship between the two concepts.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the overall disparate nature of prior literature, the qualitative approach employed was considered fundamentally essential. Our findings provide valuable insights for developing a more robust understanding of authenticity and neo-localism conceptually. In terms of future research, these findings are critical for developing scales to measure authenticity and neolocalism as applied to craft brewery visitors’ experience, which represents the next step for future research. This study is not without limitations. All interviews were conducted among craft breweries located in the Midwest and the Great Plains, close to college towns, with most having been established within the last 10 years. It is possible results might differ if conducted on coastal areas or places with a long history of craft beer industry (e.g., San Diego, CA; Boston, MA; Asheville, NC, O’Brien, 2021).

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