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## **EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY IN FOUR TOURISTIC SITUATIONS: A Case of Original and Reproduced Cultural Attractions**

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# EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY IN FOUR TOURISTIC SITUATIONS: A Case of Original and Reproduced Cultural Attractions

## Introduction

This study aims to extend understanding of the complex and heterogeneous nature of tourists' authenticity perception and its impact on the tourism experience and desire to re-experience and provide a positive word of mouth. We adopted Cohen's "nature of scene – tourist's impression of scene" (1979a, p. 26) theoretical framework of four types of touristic situations, which considers the interaction between the nature of the site (original vs. reproduced) and the perceived authenticity (objectively authentic vs. staged). We also examine authenticity perceptions as potentially influenced by tourists' orientation toward object-based authenticity, that is, by values tourists place on attractions being genuinely authentic, organic, and true (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021). Further, the study investigates (1) the impact of authenticity orientation and Cohen's touristic situations on existential authenticity of tourist experience and (2) all those factors on intention to re-create that experience and recommend it to others.

To investigate the impact of the "nature of scene – tourist's impression of scene" interaction on experiencing existential authenticity and, in turn, intended behavior, we conducted this study in two contrasting settings, original and reproduced, provided by two cultural sites in South Korea. To our knowledge, the present investigation is one of the first studies to test Cohen's two-dimensional authenticity typology. While most studies examined a linear effect of object-related authenticity on existential authenticity (e.g., Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2020; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Li et al., 2021; Park et al., 2019; Yi et al., 2017), this research considers the possibility of an interaction among the nature of a tourist site, its perceived objective authenticity, tourists' attitudes toward the value of objectively authentic attractions in producing an effect on existential authenticity of tourist experience. This effect can potentially impact desire to revisit and re-experience as well as provide a positive word of mouth, which might be helpful for attraction management.

## Literature Review

### *Cohen's Touristic Situations*

To facilitate the empirical studies of tourism in a wide variety of situations tourists find themselves, Cohen (1979a) proposed "nature of scene – tourist's impression of scene" typology, in which objective authenticity and contrived authenticity of a site are considered as two distinctive characteristics of the space (Figure 1). Cohen linked the typology to the MacCannell (1973) concept of staged authenticity reflecting consequences of tourism development when "the tourist establishment tends invariably to create non-authentic tourist spaces for the benefit of the unsuspecting tourist who tends to accept them unreflectively as 'real'" (p. 26). Those staged attractions are juxtaposed against the real sites which have not yet been manipulated by destination hosts and tourism authorities. Tourist perceptions of the space, that make the other dimension of the typology, are influenced by the way the site is presented, sending the analyst to the Goffman (1959)'s concept of tourist spaces divided into frontstage and backstage. What tourists see at the tourist sites are mainly front stage decorated to meet the expectations and, thus, make tourists

content. However, to have authentic experience with true local culture, tourists should enter the backstage of locals' daily lives, but that life is usually hidden from the tourists.

Thus, the *Authentic* situation is created by an objectively authentic site and perception of this site as original, objectively authentic, and genuine. However, the distinction between real and staged situations is not always straightforward and easy for tourists. Jean Baudrillard who theorized the simulacra and simulation wrote after visiting Yongin Korea Folk Village attraction in 2002: "I saw a traditional wedding held there and thought it was real. It's a simulation so perfect that even I, as a situation analyst, was deceived" (Han, 2002). If an expert cannot correctly attribute the nature of the space, it is even more difficult for ordinary visitors to distinguish the originality from artificiality, even when they deeply care about the former. Cohen notes that a situation of staged authenticity accepted as original might be especially frustrating for tourists who are "serious" about authenticity and for whom finding themselves tricked might lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction. When tourists perceive such a site as objectively authentic, we consider them in a touristic situation which Cohen proposed to call "covert tourist space" but we label it *Misled*.

The third situation occurs when tourists do not recognize the true nature of the real site, thus, "denying" an objectively authentic site its authenticity. Cohen (1979a) underscores that authentication is impacted by unconcerned attitudes toward authenticity and, most importantly, skepticism about feasibility of maintaining authenticity at tourist attractions. We would add that it may also happen because of a lack of communication from the site management, an insufficient prior knowledge of the place by a tourist, and/or mixed signals that received by tourists when a largely authentic site is augmented with modern components or integrated in a modern setting. Cohen and Cohen (2012) further develop the idea of authentication process with the notion of hot and cool authentication mode, which distinguishes how much mental effort tourists want to employ to decide about the true nature of the site. We call the setting of denied authenticity *Unrecognized*. Finally, when tourists recognize non-originality and a staged nature of the toured site, they find themselves in the setting of contrived authenticity, labeled *Contrived*.

		Tourist perception of the space	
		Original, real site	Staged, fake site
Nature of the space	Objectively authentic site	AUTHENTIC	UNRECOGNIZED
	Site where authenticity is staged	MISLED	CONTRIVED

Source: created by authors based on Cohen, 1979, pp. 27-28

**Figure 1.** Four touristic situations.

As people's perceptions and evaluations shape their behavior (Bruner, 1957), tourists' perceptions of tourist spaces bear behavioral consequences that are economically and culturally important and, therefore, are a worthy area for research. Tourists' impressions of a site depend not only on whether an attraction is original or not – it would be too simplistic (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999, 2000) – but on the tourists themselves, that is, including what they seek from travel and how much value they place on toured objects being objectively authentic, original, genuine, and true. While not all tourists seek authenticity, in a manner that some adventurous and conscious tourists do (Cohen 1979b, 1988), their attitudes toward authenticity

labeled authenticity orientation (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021) reflect objective, constructive, and postmodern stance toward authenticity.

### ***Authenticity Orientation***

Authenticity orientation is an attitude of an individual toward what can be considered authentic and how much object-based authenticity is valued by a tourist (Stepchenkova & Park, 2021). Object based authenticity can be indexical or iconic (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Indexical authenticity is understood as an object, an artefact, or an attraction being “real”, “true”, and “genuine”, while iconic authenticity refers to replicas, reproductions, and environments recreated in the likeness of the original thing.

In the discourse of authenticity in the tourism literature, object-based authenticity includes realist, constructivist, and postmodernist interpretations (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). These interpretations are at the base of the authenticity orientation concept, which is defined as “an overall attitude toward indexical authenticity of toured objects” (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021: 403). In brief, the realist attitude is characterized by “placing the most value on an opportunity to see “the real thing”: authentic, genuine objects and archaeological artifacts that played a significant role in human civilization, history, and culture” (Ibid: 404). Individuals with a constructivist attitude are willing to “negotiate” authenticity as they accept that historical objects disintegrate with time, and replicas are often inevitable for making a cohesive understanding of history and culture. The postmodern attitude is even farther away from the object-based authenticity, as it implies that object-based authenticity is not a concern as long as there is an enjoyment from sensory experiences created by various multimedia materials and interpretive exhibits.

### ***Existential Authenticity and Its Behavioral Consequences***

Cohen (1979b) classified tourism experience into five types: recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential, based on different interests, motivations, and meanings that people seek in cultural, social, and natural environments other than their own. Recreational and diversionary modes are characterized by travel from the individual’s cultural center (and the return afterwards) for pleasure and relaxation or escape from a grinding routine of the daily life; in such travels, tourists are generally not concerned with authenticity, and their experience is largely filled with pseudo-events (MacCannell, 1973). The experiential, experimental, and existential modes are described as a modern-day pilgrimage in search of authenticity at the cultural center of the Other, and this search is characterized by different levels of intensity, immersion, and commitment. These three Cohen’s modes of tourist experience led to further theorization by Wang (1999) of a separate type of authenticity, that is, existential authenticity which is not object-based but experience-related.

Wang (1999) distinguished authenticity into objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity, reflecting objectivism, constructivism, and postmodernism approach to interpretation of human experience: “Existential authenticity “involves personal or inter-subjective feelings activated by the liminal process of tourist activities” (Wang 1999: 351) Thus, existential authenticity has a focus on “emotions, sensations, relationships, and a sense of self” (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 680) and highlights such aspects of tourist experience as being in touch with his/her true self, have a sense of being lost in time and space, connects with history and culture, and finding inner peace (Stepchenkova & Park, 2021).

Authenticity research obtained an empirical evidence that object-based authenticity affects existential authenticity of the tourist experience (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Yi et al., 2017) and, further, authenticity perceptions affect the intention to consume cultural attractions (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Ramkissoon & Uysal 2011) leading to destination loyalty (Yi et al., 2018). In situations of staged authenticity, postmodernists report larger existential authenticity than realists and constructivists (Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021). However, the impact of an interaction between the nature of the tourist space and the outcome of authentication process by tourists on whether or not an individual experience a state of existential authenticity has not been studied yet. Cohen's typology provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining those effects. Thus, three questions are formulated for the study:

**Research question 1.** Does tourist's authenticity orientation impact authentication of tourist attractions, both real and staged? Is there an interaction effect of nature of the site and tourist's authenticity orientation on the outcome of the authentication process?

**Research question 2.** In which touristic situation tourists are more likely to experience existential authenticity? Is authenticity orientation a factor in this process?

**Research question 3.** In which touristic situation tourists express greater intention to revisit and willingness to recommend? When controlled for existential authenticity, does the nature of the site and authenticity orientation still play a role?

## **Methodology**

### ***Sites and Data Collection***

The study was conducted in South Korea. Two cultural sites, Bukchon Hanok Village (BHV) and Korea Folk Village (KFV), emerged as the most suitable sites to represent the organically authentic and contrived attractions based on the interviews with three researchers from a policy-making institute for tourism in South Korea, one from a national level DMO, and four university professors with specialization in tourism.

**Bukchon Hanok Village (BHV).** In Korean, Bukchon means northern village and Hanok means traditional wooden house. The village is located in the center of Seoul. It has sustained and preserved the traditional style houses for almost 600 years from the times of the Joseon Dynasty. During the times of Japanese colonization of Korea and the Korean war, scores of traditional buildings in the country were destroyed and later replaced with high-rises and modern apartments. A historical village with traditional houses where people still live their daily lives is a rare sight in Korea today. In BHV, several alleys of traditional houses are concentrated in a relatively small area. BHV is managed by Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), an agency of the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (MCST), and is tasked with preservation and promotion of Korean cultural heritage. Any remodeling should be permitted by CHA to preserve authenticity and traditional look of the village. Some traditional houses provide cultural experiences as cultural centers, guest houses, restaurants, and tea houses so that visitors have opportunities to learn the traditional living style, dress, and food of Korea; the admission fees are not charged. The BHV site by its history, preservation, and appearance is considered objectively authentic and provides two study settings: *Authentic* and *Unrecognized*.

**Korean Folk Village (KFV).** The official Korean name for this site is Minsokchon. Minsok means folk and Chon means village, however, the place uses Korean Folk Village as its official English

name. The site was established as a planned cultural village in 1974 with an ownership of a public enterprise management, but it is currently owned and operated by a private company. The admission fees are 25 dollars for adults, 20 dollars for teenagers and 10 dollars for children, but groups of 20 or over get a discounted rate. KFV was built to promote Korean culture and provide an opportunity to experience it. The site replicates the Joseon period, with 270 Korean traditional houses and more than 20,000 traditional tools and devices used in daily life of Joseon people. The houses are built using traditional techniques, and the accuracy of exterior and interior designs and displays had been verified by experts. Traditional workshops set up at the site are operated by licensed craftsmen demonstrating their skills (e.g., black smith, dying clothes, or wooden ware). There are traditional music performances, plays, and wedding ceremonies reenacted at the site. Cast members in traditional clothes walk around the sites and interact with visitors. There are some hands-on experiences at the site like for example making crafts or art performances in which visitors can participate. The place is still evolving in a way that the management keeps creating new events and festivals with different theme every season. The place is fully staged, thus, providing two settings, or touristic situations, for the study: *Misled* and *Contrived*.

The questionnaires were distributed for three weeks in September-October 2018 at both BHV and KFV sites using the interception method with self-completed questionnaires. In BHV, participants were screened for being visitors, not residents. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and upon completion of the questionnaire, a lottery ticket worth 1 dollar was provided as a token of appreciation. After removing the incomplete surveys (approximately 5% from each site), data for 223 BHV and 473 KFV respondents were retained.

### ***Instrument***

Operationalization of object-based authenticity focuses on perceived originality of the toured sites (Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999). Objective authenticity was measured with three items following Casteran and Roederer (2013), e.g., *This Site is the original site*. Existential authenticity measure of six items was borrowed from Kolar & Zabkar (2010), e.g., *During my visit, I felt connected with human history and civilization*. Behavioral intent variable included two aspects: Revisit intention, e.g., *This Site is worth revisiting*, and Willingness to recommend, e.g., *I sincerely recommend this Site*. Each variable was measured using 7-point Likert scale, with the larger score indicating higher objective and existential authenticity evaluations as well as higher behavioral intentions. The measures showed high reliability and validity in several subsequent studies (Lee et al., 2022, Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021).

Three types of authenticity orientation, realist, constructivist, and postmodernist, were operationalized following descriptions from Stepchenkova and Belyaeva (2021). Visitors to BHV and KFV were instructed to read the descriptions and then select the one that best described their attitude toward authenticity of historic sites, cultural attractions, ethnographic museums, and other places of historic and cultural heritage (Table 1). We also collected information on gender, age, education, and income. Three additional variables, First visit, Tour, and Good weather, were operationalized as binary (yes/no) variables to control for previous experience with the site, quality of the tour guides (versus self-guiding tour), and moods potentially influenced by weather conditions (about temperature biases in public opinion surveys, see Baylis et al., 2018).

**Table 1.** Study variables in four touristic situations.

	Bukchon Hanok Village				Korean Folk Village				<i>F</i>	Groups with equal means
	Authentic (A) N=95		Unrecognized (U) N=128		Misled (M) N=308		Contrived (C) N=165			
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
OA	4.91	0.59	3.19	0.74	4.74	0.72	3.02	0.66	335.16*	(C, U) (M, A)
EA	4.79	0.88	3.90	0.96	4.82	0.91	4.28	0.98	35.90*	(U), (C), (A, M)
BI	5.28	1.16	4.34	1.20	4.77	1.32	4.47	1.29	12.16*	(U, C), (C, M), (A)

OA: objective authenticity; EA: existential authenticity; BI: behavioral intentions.

Skewness and kurtosis for all variables were in the range of [-1; +1].

Significant at 0.001 level.

## Results

We ensured the applicability of the linear model specification by fitting various curves to the data: neither model convincingly outperformed the linear relationship. Assumptions of homoskedasticity, independence, and normality of the error terms distribution were held. The variables were entered in the model in blocks: Visit (first visit, tour, and weather conditions), authenticity orientation (two dummy variables with Realist being a referent category), and touristic situation (three dummy variables with Authentic being a referent category) and, for Model 2, EA variable. Tables 2 and 3 reports variance explained by each block of independent variables (change in  $R^2$ ) and its significance. It also reports  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  for the final model, along with its *F*-statistic and standardized coefficients of predictors and their significance level. There were no multivariate outliers in either model (as determined by Mahalanobis distance statistic) or unduly influential observations (as determined by Cook's distance). Durbin-Watson statistic was in the recommended range of 1.5-2.5 (Field, 2013).

Touristic situation is the most influential factor in experiencing existential authenticity ( $\Delta R^2 = 13.7\%$ ). The impact of predictors on existential authenticity was statistically the same in Authentic and Misled settings, while being significantly smaller in the other two settings. Conditions of the visit account for 2.6% of the variance in EA, with people having higher existential authenticity when the weather is good. Authenticity orientation has no impact on EA.

In Model 2, dependent variable was BI, while EA was entered as the fourth block in the hierarchical regression (Table 3). Behavioral intent was influenced the most by existential authenticity ( $\Delta R^2 = 25.8\%$ ). Visit conditions (7.7%), and touristic situation (5.0%) also played significant roles. Predisposition toward objective authenticity accounted for less than 1.0% of the total variance in dependent variable. The impact of touristic situation was the same in Authentic and Unrecognized setting, while being in Misled and Contrived settings resulted in a statistically smaller effect as compared to the referent Authentic category.

**Table 2.** Model 1: Existential authenticity.

Variable blocks	Change in $R^2$	$p$ -value
Visit	0.026	<0.001
Authenticity orientation	0.006	0.139
Touristic situation	0.137	<0.001
Full Model		$p$ -value
$R^2$	0.169	
Adj. $R^2$	0.159	
$F$ -value, $df=677$	16.977	<0.001
Durbin-Watson	1.573	
Standardized coefficient	$\beta$	$p$ -value
First visit	0.010	0.769
Tour	-0.063	0.103
Weather	0.150	<0.001
AO: Constructivist	0.060	0.140
AO: Postmodernist	0.043	0.297
TS: Unrecognized	-0.333	<0.001
TS: Misled	0.040	0.465
TS: Contrived	-0.211	<0.001

**Table 3.** Model 2: Intended behavior.

Variable blocks	Change in $R^2$	$p$ -value
Visit	0.077	<0.001
Authenticity orientation	0.008	0.061
Touristic situation	0.050	<0.001
Existential authenticity	0.258	<0.001
Full Model		$p$ -value
$R^2$	0.392	
Adj. $R^2$	0.384	
$F$ -value, $df=677$	47.861	<0.001
Durbin-Watson	1.840	
Standardized coefficient	$\beta$	$p$ -value
First visit	-0.048	0.112
Tour	-0.096	0.004
Weather	0.123	<0.001
AO: Constructivist	0.059	0.094
AO: Postmodernist	0.036	0.309
TS: Unrecognized	-0.082	0.058
TS: Misled	-0.177	<0.001
TS: Contrived	-0.138	0.002
Existential authenticity	0.557	<0.001



## Conclusion and Discussion

The study offers empirical evidence for the theoretical and practical relevance of Cohen's (1979a) taxonomy as a tool of understanding tourist experiences. It shows a dynamic nature of authenticity from both the tourist's and the supplier's side by examining the interplay between the type of a tourist attraction, the individual's authenticity orientation, perceived objective authenticity, experiential state of existential authenticity, and not the least intention to revisit and recommend. Following the conceptual work of Cohen (1979a: 27-28), two cultural villages in South Korea provided four types of touristic situation-authenticity (Authentic), staged authenticity (Misled), denied authenticity (Unrecognized), and inauthenticity (Contrived). These perceived authenticities were juxtaposed against the characteristics of spaces (original versus staged) and tourists' perception of the space (authentic versus non-authentic).

The findings demonstrate that authenticity perception is often misaligned with the nature of the site; thus, the tourist may deem an original site as inauthentic or perceive the reproduced site as objectively authentic. Importantly, when tourists perceived the site as objectively authentic, they experience a higher level of existential authenticity regardless of the site's nature. Hence, it is critical for the site management to facilitate authentication process that results in aligned perception of objectively authentic site. The higher existential authenticity translates into higher intention to revisit and recommend the site. This presents an ethical dilemma for staged attractions about the extent to which the true nature of the site should be communicated, as non-authentic attractions are also capable of delivering existential authenticity experience in Misled condition. Since non-authenticity situations (Unrecognized) can outperform authenticity condition (Misled) on the intention to visit variable, an alternative strategy for staged attractions would be to focus on such aspects of the tourist experience as presentation's quality, variability, convenience, and service which might compensate for not being perceived as authentic in achieving enjoyable experience and desire to repeatedly visit and recommend.

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