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Authenticity in Voltourism: A motive for a decommodified form of tourism

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This paper should meet the TTRA 2011 conference theme of “Environmental, social or economic impacts of (or on) the travel and tourism industry”.

It is also related to two sub themes:

**Methods and findings in measuring the results of tourism research
Unique & common travel research methods, approaches, or uses**

Authenticity in Voltourism: A motive for decommodified Tourism

Abstract

Theoretical and practical hegemony characterize varied forms of tourism. Tourism, the service-based product, has various commoditised subsidiaries in our neoliberal era. In the *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord portrays tourism akin to a symbol of commodification “a by-product of the circulation of commodities” (Debord 1994). A traditional form of tourism such as mass tourism is a clear model of commoditized tourism. Volunteer tourism is one of the fastest growing significant forms of alternative tourism nowadays (Wearing 2001). This paper aims to abstract and clarify the role of authenticity, the foremost motivation, in volunteer travel structure. The study explores the motives of the voltourists and whether authenticity has a major role in attracting them to selected tourism destinations. Also the study looks at voltourism as a decommodified form of tourism. Throughout the literature review, the study found that the majority of the voltourists travelled to satisfy their authentic needs alongside with new experiences while helping the other in building, teaching and caring, thus, authenticity has a major role in distinguishing voltourism from other forms of tourism. In addition, the study suggests that a sufficient level of interaction between tourists and local communities would create more decommodified and sustainable forms of tourism such as voltourism.

Keywords: Authenticity, Voltourism, tourism motivations, commodified tourism, voltourism experience.

Authenticity

In the *World English Dictionary* “Authentic” is defined as follows: “accurate in representation of the facts; trustworthy; reliable: an authentic account”. In tourism and according to Taylor (2001), there are many definitions for authenticity similar to the amount of people wrote concerning it. While Cohen (1988) sees that simultaneous authenticity with the search for unity linking the self and societal institutions, which gifted pre-modern existence with “reality”. It appears that authenticity stands for the search for the real and for the original appearance of the tangible objects and intangible experiences.

It is a challenge for researchers of tourism to identify the real motivations behind travel. Classifying the types of tourism, however, does help in recognizing the motive behind such travel. Discerning the motivations behind tourism has guided research into tourism for numerous decades. This is clear by surveying the literature.

“Authenticity” is always present as a direct and indirect motive for travel. In fact, by looking through varied forms of tourism (cultural, historical, religious, rural, ecotourism voltourism), it becomes clear that authenticity emerges as a major factor driving tourists to visit selected destinations.

Authenticity in the tourism industry

In tourism and in volunteer tourism (voltourism) particularly, authenticity, the human quality, appears as a separate motive for most of the voltourists. According to MacCannell, (1999) who was a pioneer in addressing the role of authenticity in tourism, tourists search for authenticity by viewing their travel as a form of pilgrimage. Authenticity is a key issue in the

attraction level for tourists (Ehrentraut, 1993), a flexible theme in tourism anthropology and social studies ((MacCannell, 1973), and an agenda for tourism studies (Wang, 1999). Authenticity could be as a real object in the tourist experience. Conceptualising authenticity as a social construction notion links it to the study of tourism in anthropology. Thus, authenticity could be described as “constructive”, which is to say, a result of a socially constructed experience of culture. Secondly it could also be described as “objective.” Here authenticity refers to the destination as an object such as a monument. Finally there is “existential authenticity.” This is based on the tourist activities, and this is what (Wang 1999) went to, for example: some tourists try to eat authentically and according to the destination’s people culture or way.

The complex nature of authenticity is simplified by linking its meaning to museums. Museums have “authentic” or “inauthentic” materials, according to the production of the tourism products and where they are made by local people or manufactured outside of the destination country. According to Wang (1999), tourism products like food, housing, dress and art also could be described “authentic” or “inauthentic”, and authenticity in tourism applies on the tourist experience and the touring objective.

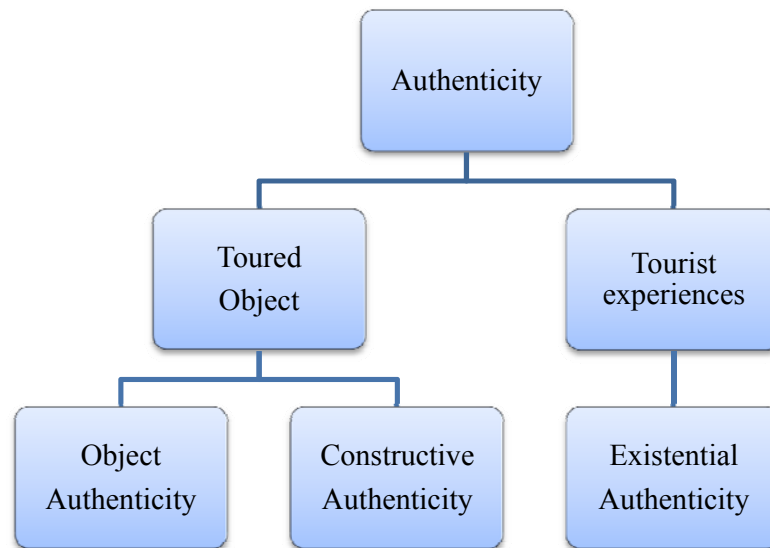


Figure 1: Wang’s Dimensions of Authenticity
Source: From Wang, 1999.

Some tourism researchers like Urry (1990) in *The Tourist Gaze* argue that tourists are aware of the impossibility of having authentic experiences while practicing inauthentic tourism activities. People would even enjoy doing many activities in their trips or holidays without considering authenticity. While commodification became a sign for many tourism activities, authenticity would appear as a non commodified motive to attract or divert more tourists for selected destinations.

Many values in our world, such as individualism, or the searches for authentic and valuable things are impacts of postmodernism on the tourism spectacle. In another words, authenticity would appear as a generally constructed theory injected into the tourism products

to serve and attract more tourists, at this point we should be careful not to commodified authenticity like other social values.

Mass tourism and alternative tourism: motivations and experiences

Mass tourism, the traditional package of tourism, has fewer responsibilities than alternative forms of tourism toward the environment and the socio-cultural concerns. Nowadays, people realize the long term impacts of the tourism industry; it takes a while to distinguish the privilege from the poor impacts on tourism destinations. Travelers started searching for better and practices forms of tourism. In short, the need for alternative tourism is popular these days. A very accepted growing alternative form of tourism is voltourism, where people achieve enjoyment and noble goals (Wearing and Neil, 2000)

Mass tourism, the group packaging style of experience of tourism activities, in general started to develop after the industrial revolution, although it existed before that for the aristocratic classes of urbanized European countries. Mass tourism was facilitated by the development of transportation and technology along with extra leisure time in those countries, generally Mediterranean coastal areas in destinations like France and Italy. Certainly, mass tourism was directed to destination sites which had the “three Ss” (Sun, Sea and Sand) It was also less concerned about the environmental and the cultural impacts on destinations.

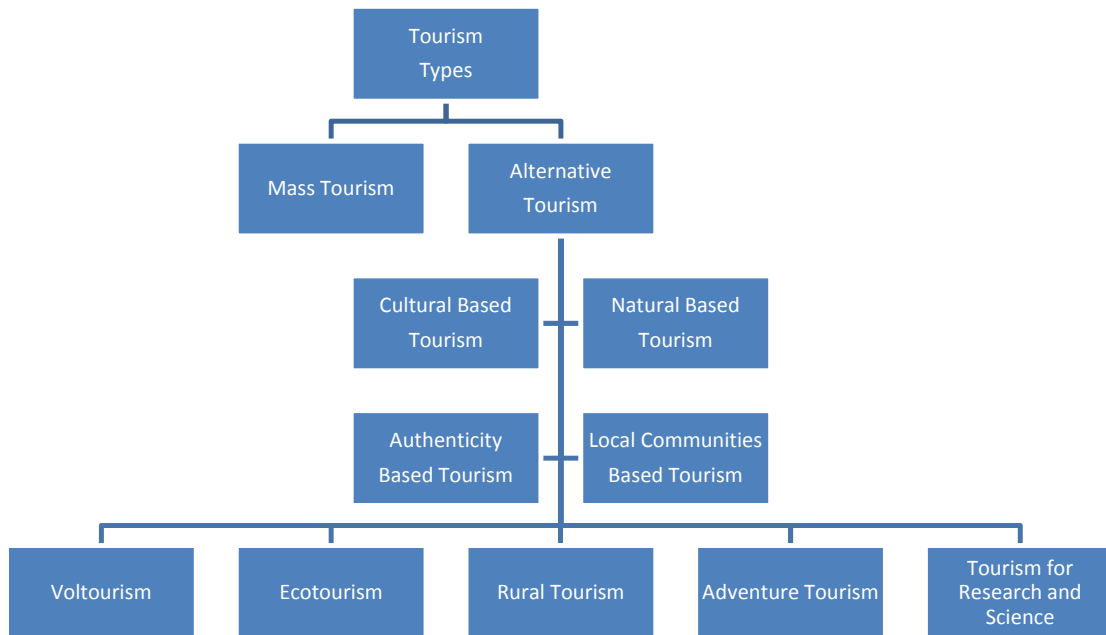


Figure 2: An overview of the tourism types.

On the other hand, many people realized the need for other travelling options equivalent with more sustainable forms and practises. Alternative forms of tourism came out after the emergence of the negative impacts of the mass tourism (figure 2). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO/ 2010), around 1 billion travelers is the estimated number of tourists for 2010 and 1.6 billion for 2020. This mixture (mass and alternative) expansion indicates a huge growth rate, exceeding 4% yearly growth. Although there are no separate statistical indicators for alternative tourism, it looks like the awareness level of tourists toward sustainable travel and tourism is increasing. Many countries are working on developing varied alternative forms of tourism to sustain their share of the tourism market, since there is more demand on the friendly forms of tourism like voltourism.

According to Uysal & Jurowski (1994) tourism motivations are defined as the worldwide complex of external and internal biological and cultural forces, wants and social needs that affect the behaviour and experience of the tourists. Tourism motivations are linked to the tourist's behaviours, throughout psychological, socio-cultural and physical dimensions (Gnoth, 1997). Studying tourism motivations helps in understanding the guests' needs and how to arrange more successful destinations to attract them. Moreover, it is very important to understand and examine the tourist motivations in relation to any destination, including their choice of travel to selected place but not to others.

For many tourism studies researchers, simultaneously the "push" and "pull" concepts in tourism motivation are important. According to Zhang and Marcussen (2007) the "push" factors are related to the tourist personal inspiration, such as his needs to change his mood, the search for fantasy, a plan for a break and entertainment, exploring adventure and showing off. In the voltourism case, "push" motivations refer to the search for authenticity, helping the other, sharing the knowledge, and the exploration for life experience. However, the common "push" factors in the tourism motivations would still appear in the voltourism model. Furthermore, "pull" has more to do with the destination attraction, like the destination's location, climate, services, history, culture and varied attractive facilities. This attractiveness applies in common types of tourism. However, in the case of voltourism the circumstances of the destination play a major role in attracting tourists, for example, voltourists would target places that had disasters or need health aid. Poor communities require development in education and awareness of how the destination is authentic and reliable toward its surrounding nature culture and heritage.

It seems like different motivations often companied to attract the tourist, and this applies to the voltourism form as well. For example, tourists travel to a selected region to teach and learn at the same time, to enjoy helping the other combined with the self development, and to care for the people in need while healing the self emotions.

Backpackers, voltourists, budget travelers and the search for authenticity

A study including 249 self-administered surveys conducted in central Melbourne, Australia finds that the shared motivational factors between backpackers and voltourists, representing more potential for additional tourism products includes the role of volunteering in it (Ooi, & Laing, 2010). Backpackers do search for authenticity in a certain stage of their travel (Noy, 2004). Therefore, it looks like the common factor among those travelers lies beyond their interaction with the host communities and their desire to help the other.

Authenticity has significant meaning for the budget travelers and their overall experiences of the trip. Their search for authenticity controls their behaviours and has a direct influence on the local communities or destinations. According to Bryon & Derre (2008) the issues influence travelers knowledge and experience are varied between the destination and the travellers motives.

Backpackers and budget travelers search for volunteering in their trips like the voltourists. Usually they travel to the poor destinations and to the developing world searching for authenticity and reality they unable to find in their own rich and developed community. When I come across the heavy traffic of the western voltourists, backpackers and the budget travelers in Egypt or Jordan enjoying the rare spectacle of the land, people and lifestyle, I realized how important for those people to obtain the real experience from the authentic places. They prefer to eat, sleep, transfer and buy what they think it is traditional.

Although my main focus in this study is an anthropological one, I would like to touch on the role of authenticity from marketing prospective. Some destinations expand the potential market by constructing or staging authenticity for selected type of travelers or tourists. Tourists decide whether or not to go to specific destinations according to the level of attraction, and so we see clearly how many destinations promote authenticity to catch the attention of voltourists or budget travelers.

According to Zhang & Marcussen (2007) the market will be segmented according to the tourist's motivations and actions by identifying their needs. Tourism planners would customise and make available the right product for the right market segment. To illustrate, authenticity reproduced in some destinations to attract more backpackers or voltourists, Dubai museum and the surrounding area, for example, were reshaped in a very authentic approaches and techniques. If you see it you will not realize that it is simplified and rebuilt from scratch.

Back to Voltourism tourism

The Land Conservancy of British Columbia refers to the volunteer tourism as a “conservation holidays” (*The Volun Tourist*, 2010). Voltourism comprises the practices of a person available for a nonpaid working vacation for the purpose of volunteering. Moreover, voltourism would be a practical alternative to the traditional types of tourism. It can be described as a friendly travel to exchange the destination experience with unpaid help.

To illustrate, Volunteer tourism or “Voltourism” is an alternative type of tourism, has grown quickly in the most developed countries such as Northern America and Western Europe. Voltourism helps host communities to protect their culture and helps guests learn about other cultures in a practical way. Although, it is not very clear if voltourism would serve both (host and guest) positively without side-effects. The global need for poverty alleviation along with the increasing awareness level of the environmental issues such as the climate change supported and promoted the emergence of voltourism. Tour operators and volunteering agencies (NGOs) worked together in developing and sponsoring this new form of tourism (volunteer tourism or voltourism). Because of this regular development, the volunteer vacation notion has had significant expansion and growth in the mid-1980s, which is pointed to by the growing number of voltourism organisations (Carter, 2008).

Voltourism a decommodified form of tourism

According to Debord, (1974, Ch 7 : 168) in *Society of the Spectacle* "Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal." It looks like the tourism spectacle is similar to any other commoditized spectacle driven by advertisement for profit accumulation. Heritage, culture, landscape and any other tourism attraction items or needs are for sale in the neoliberal era. Moreover, in some developing countries, tourism became the agenda of rich countries to apply their neoliberal policies. Commodified forms of tourism in this neoliberal era will not help the tourist to get the right experience and will prevent local communities from gaining the necessary benefit. Also an equal footing interaction between host and guest will be prevented (Wearing & Ponting, 2009).

In fact, due to processes of globalization, most popular tourism destinations worldwide are based on commodification of tangible and intangible materials including, culture, landscape, heritage and human being as structured and reshaped as goods for sale. The powerful North American and western cultural hegemony on developing countries is controlling their tourism production with less care about major issues like environment and culture. Lots of spoiled destinations are witnessing their damaged identities, language, heritage, coasts, biodiversity, fauna and flora and more. Moreover, side effects not only occur on the tourist side, it involves the guest as well, for example, the cross-cultural communications between the host and the guest have an effect on their identity, culture and authentic values.

Going back to the question on whether voltourism is a decommodified form of tourism, Wearing & Ponting (2009), in their voltourism case of north west Sumatra, portray a third space of representation where host and guest meet and interact as "hybrid selves" where "the other" represents the tourist experience and practices. See figure (3).

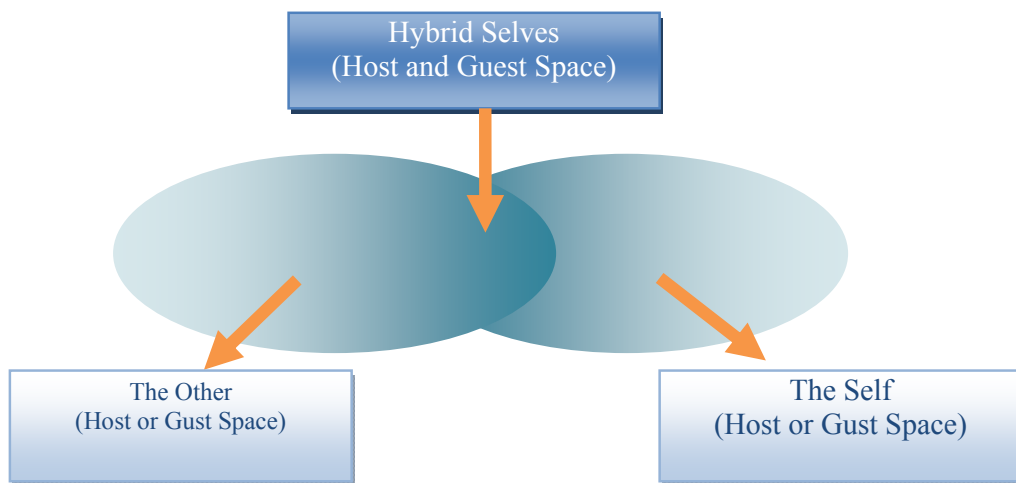


Figure 3: An overview of explains how host and guest interact in a voltourism form.

The NGOs along with the tour operators work together in order to create the voltourism packages. It is not clear if all the NGOs are working positively toward the volunteering concept. According to Alison Gardner who wrote on the Global Volunteer (GV) portal (2010) there is a tremendous demand between people, especially in North America, for helping other communities in many developing countries around the world. If the nature and culture are commodified, then volunteering would be commodified as well if there are benefits for some people.

Postmodern western societies with their denial of life meanings contribute to creating a search for experiences which have meaning. They create the search for authenticity, helping the other and further high-quality social, spiritual, physical and intellectual interactions. All these motives could be represented as commodities. Thus, volunteer trips are the perfect solution to the market demanders.

Introducing voltourism as an alternative form of tourism outline can add value to sustainable tourism development. Tourism policy makers will include as much as necessary clear laws and regulations to develop and organize the operations in the field of voluntourism to keep it as much as possible from commodification.

Conclusions

Voltourism is leading to the reconceptualising of the tourism phenomenon. The voltourists motivations including the search for authenticity reshape a new friendly form of tourism with fewer side-effects on local communities and tourists. This is the main idea behind the emergence of voltourism, although the risk level in the voltourism would go higher in regards to cultural impact. Clearly the search for authenticity is greater in the case of voltourism, tourists spend more time with closer face to the host people to teach, care or help them while enjoying what they feel an authentic experience. Tourism, the fastest growing industry (UNWTO 2010), has two main forms, a regular form such as mass tourism and an alternative form like voltourism. Realizing the right voltourism package with the right agent to the right destination would help in keeping it away from commodification.

Authenticity is a central motive attracting voltourists to travel, where they can express themselves and friendly communicate with the other. The search for the authentic object or experience is behind the voltourism development. In some cases, we have seen how authenticity was staged for the sake of attraction and destination promotion. In this mixture, a space for host-guest contact and interactive cross-cultural communication can be created, Although it is not easy to keep voltourism away from commodification in this neoliberal era, voltourism has a minimal impact on local communities and tourists among other traditional forms of tourism.

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