

PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY: AUSTRALIAN LUXURY SPECIALIST ACCOMMODATION EXPERIENCES

Anita Manfreda^a, Rajka Presbury^a and Scott Richardson^b

^a Torrens University Australia, ^b The Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management

ABSTRACT

Tourists are becoming more discerning and hedonistic, seeking luxury, not based on products and services, but on authentic experiences, thus impacting how the accommodation sector responds to new customer needs. This paper suggests that a relationship exists between the notion of guest experience and tourist's perception of authenticity in luxury specialist accommodation, which could assist industry practitioners in strengthening customer's satisfaction. From an interpretivist, multiple case-study methodology, this paper seeks to explore the concepts of guest experience and perception of authenticity in specialist luxury accommodation in Australia, proposing a conceptual framework for a future research study, aimed to draw substantial findings in the field of luxury specialist accommodation, guest experience and authenticity.

Keywords: *Specialty lodging; Guest satisfaction; Luxury lodges; Experiential luxury; Accommodation experience; Australian accommodation*

Introduction

Since Pine and Gilmore (1998), the concept of experience has become a crucial point of discussion in tourism and hospitality broadly and the accommodation sector specifically. As Coulton (2018, para. 2) suggests, “*guests are increasingly choosing to spend more money on authentic experiences rather than luxury for the sake of it*”. Therefore, those providing luxury specialist accommodation have moved away from merely delivering products and services, now aiming toward establishing a deeper connection with tourist's emotions (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005; Brace, 2007; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010; Coulton, 2018). Examples of this trend are Cristalbrook Lodge in Queensland, One & Only Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort in the Blue Mountains, Southern Ocean Lodge in Kangaroo Valley, SA, Longitude 131° in Ayers Rock, Yulara; these Australian luxury lodges are believed to be able to provide the tourist with the most authentic, unique and finest Australian experiences (Tourism Australia, 2018). These typologies of accommodation base their roots in the notion of triggering emotional response through customer experience leading to heightened guest's satisfaction (Harkison, 2016; Coulton, 2018). The hospitality and accommodation industry is, thus, focused on developing products that satisfy the desire of the traveller to obtain authentic, emotional, intimate and worthwhile tourism experiences (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). As Knudsen and Waade (2010) suggest, both tourists and tourism providers are now re-investing in the concept of authenticity, to intensify the emotional response to tourism experiences, as well as to create the conditions (also known as “staging”) for the co-creation of these experiences.

Whilst the concepts of authenticity and guest experience have been previously explored, the relationship between accommodation guest experience, perception of authenticity and satisfaction are yet to be investigated. This paper proposes an investigation of the academic literature on Authenticity, Guest Experience and Luxury Specialist Accommodation, outlining the chosen methodology and presenting the potential significance and contributions of this future project.

Literature review

The quest for authenticity and experiencing “the Other” seems to have always been an intrinsic part of the experience of travel, however from the post-industrial era, issues on the perception of authenticity of the tourism experience and the role of the tourist itself have emerged (MacCannell, 1973; 1976; 1999; Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Spooner, 1986). Wang (1999) suggested that, given the numerous

and complex connotations of the concept of authenticity, they can be classified in object-related and subject-related authenticity.

Within the object-related authenticity, Wang (1999) includes objectivist and constructivist and post-modernist approaches. Objectivist authenticity relates to the idea that tourists seek authenticity in the toured-object, therefore satisfaction comes in finding the object being true and not artificial. This consequently uncovers the dichotomy between what is original and what is not, or as MacCannell (1976; 1999) calls them front and back stages. MacCannell (1976) postulated the idea of front and back stage in tourism settings, as the condition for the permanent failure of the tourist to experience authenticity. In fact, even though tourists might perceive their experience of the toured-object as authentic, the experience can still be considered intrinsically inauthentic if the toured-object is, in fact, a falsehood (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Wang, 1999). MacCannell, re-elaborating Goffman's (1959) model of front and back regions, insists on the idea that the tourist seeks to enter back stage regions for the experience of authenticity, however, often front regions are purposely staged to resemble back regions for the tourists, inevitably making tourists "victims" of staged authenticity.

Cohen (1988), after working on MacCannell's authenticity model, criticised MacCannell's idea of the tourist as being simplistic and easily fooled by staged experiences. Cohen (1988) introduced the idea that tourists have different perceptions of their tourism experience, being perceived as either real or staged, regardless of the real nature of the tourism setting. Pearce and Moscardo (1985; 1986) argued that both MacCannell, with his environmental framework of staged-authenticity, and Cohen, with the introduction of the tourist's perception, have not accounted for the idea that tourism authenticity is also based on human interactions and processes of co-creation. Salamone (1997, cited in Wang, 1999) also introduced the idea that authenticity is context-bound, therefore it makes sense only when it relates to its own context. This has posed the foundation for the notion of constructive authenticity, shifting the meaning of authenticity from the object itself, to the perception of the toured-object by the tourist, the social construction around the quality of tourism settings. Culler (1981, cited in Wang 1999) describes this notion of authenticity as "symbolic", as the tourists does not seek objective authenticity, but the projection of his/her expectations onto the toured-object, and as it, being intrinsically personal, it is not pre-determined but relative (Cohen, 1988; Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Wang, 1999). A post-modernist view of authenticity is closely related the constructivism and presents the idea that tourists have become less interested in whether the original is authentic or not, justifying the tourist's quest of the inauthentic, leading to the post-modernist rejection of the concept of authenticity altogether (Cohen, 1995, cited in Wang, 1999).

Wang was the first to introduce the concept of existentialist authenticity: authenticity is found within oneself, based on individual and subjective feelings that are activated by tourism activities rather than objects (Wang, 1999), arguing that the tourist finds satisfaction in tourism settings not because they identify the toured-object as being authentic, as objectivist would claim, but because one feels more authentic to oneself by engaging in tourism activities that are outside the ordinary. Based on the existentialist approach, toured-object is merely irrelevant. What is instead relevant to the tourist authenticity quest, and thus to the tourist's satisfaction, is the experience of the authentic self.

Following this approach, tourist satisfaction can be achieved even in tourism settings, which, from an objectivist perspective, are by nature staged, such as tourism accommodation. It has been, in fact, extensively demonstrated that the perception of authenticity in tourism experiences holds a key role in tourist (dis)satisfaction (Ryan, 1991; Pearce & Moscardo, 1985, 1986; Waller & Lea, 1998; Wang, 1999), and that accommodation experience bears great weight in the totality of tourism experience (Wight, 1998).

More recent studies on authenticity have also presented new ontological connotations, including performative authenticity (Knudsen & Waade, 2010), which aims to link the object-related and existentialist connotations of authenticity. Performative authenticity is nor object-related, or a subjective state, authenticity is "something people can *do* and a feeling that can be *experienced*"

(Knudsen & Waade, 2010, p. 1), authenticity is performed, processual (Rickly & Vidon, 2018). Performative approach forms a closer and deeper connection to the experiential nature of authenticity. Object-related and subject-related approaches on authenticity are not in contrast under the performative approach, but informing one another (Rickly & Vidon, 2018).

Research on the process of authentication, relationality of authenticity, alienation, fantasy of authenticity have recently emerged, however, it has been suggested that the research conducted so far on authenticity has created more confusion than clarity around the meaning of authenticity and that, despite the ample research on the topic, the focus should move from the ontological stances to a more practical view of authenticity (Rickly & Vidon, 2018). Regina Bendrix (1997, p. 21, cited in Rickly-Boyd, 2012, p. 269) has in fact affirmed that “the crucial questions to be answered are not ‘what is authenticity?’ but ‘who needs authenticity and why?’ and ‘how has authenticity been used?’”.

Authenticity studies should be devoted to answering the question of why authenticity matters, to both tourists and practitioners (Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Rickly & Vidon, 2018).

The relationship between tourism experience, authenticity and satisfaction is even more evident when one considers the emerging theories on guest experience (Drucker, 1986; Walls et al., 2011; Knutson & Beck, 2004; Schmitt & Zarattonello, 2013; Smit & Melissen, 2018). As Pine and Gilmore have suggested “now more than ever, the authentic is what customers really want” (2007, xii, cited in Knudsen & Waade, 2010). Experience-based studies assist businesses and academics to understand what customers perceive as valuable, and consequently to provide effective and detailed guidelines and recommendations for experience design and management (Walls et al., 2011; Harkison, 2016).

However, given a wider acceptance of the concept of experience in business research and amongst practitioners, considering the diversity and specificity that lies within the accommodation sector, scholarly research on accommodation guest experience still provides great opportunities for further research to be undertaken (Kandampully et al., 2018; Jain et al., 2017; Harkison, 2016). More narrowly, when considering the exploration of guest experiences in luxury accommodation, aside from a number of available studies (Walls et al., 2011; Harkison, 2016; Harkison et al., 2018), and even more so for luxury specialist accommodation (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005), further research is required.

One fact that has been established by research is that guest experience in luxury accommodation is radically different from the more general and widely applied concept and characteristics of guest experience, and thus, it necessitates different approaches to its design and management (Harkison, 2016; Walls et al., 2011; Grigorian et al., 2014). Walls et al. (2011) acknowledges the fact that environmental factors and human interaction are key characteristics of guest experience in luxury accommodation. They, however, identify that guest experience is not only a reflection of external surroundings and human interaction, but that guest experiences in luxury accommodation is also affected by the personal characteristics of the guest and by trip-related factors, demonstrating that guests in luxury settings seek highly personalised experiences. Harkison et al. (2018) also provided a holistic blueprint for designing and co-creating guest experience in luxury accommodation in New Zealand, which places great emphasis on the very personal, emotional and complex nature of luxury accommodation experience. Despite some studies on luxury experience (Grigorian et al., 2014; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Heackel et al., 2003), the concept of luxury experience has rarely been studied in the accommodation context, leaving the field largely unexplored.

The themes of luxury and hospitality have, however, had a long history of association (O’Gorman, 2009; Harkison, 2016). For the most part, studies on luxury accommodation have focused on physical features (Griffin et al., 1996; Davidson et al., 2006; Kucukusta et al., 2014) and service quality (Presbury et al., 2005; Baum, 2006) to create a differentiation between luxury hotels and regular hotels (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010; Walls et al., 2011; O’Neill, 2004).

In the business world, the “new luxury” concept is “more concerned about experience, authenticity and rarity of goods” (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010 p. 711; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). This has,

in fact, promoted the diffusion of new forms of accommodation which are no longer known for their physical features, or services, but as types of accommodation that focus on experience as point of differentiation (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). These types of accommodation include, but are not limited to luxury lodges, eco-lodges, luxury camps, rural or natural luxury resorts and many other forms of accommodation that cannot be otherwise grouped within the boundaries of traditional accommodation (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010).

McIntosh and Siggs (2005) are amongst the very few who have given some attention to the experiential nature of this type of accommodation, defined as specialist accommodation by Morrison et al (1996) and specialty lodging by Moscardo & Benckendorff (2010). It has been suggested that this type of accommodation is requested by tourists for the experience of “comfort, luxury, uniqueness, history, host-guest interaction, and the more personal touches they can provide” (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005 p.76), sought by a more discerning and targeted market, for which authentic and exclusive experiences are more compelling factors than elements, commonly associated to traditional luxury, such as physical features and service quality, in their accommodation choices (Coulton, 2018).

Method

The aim of this study is to investigate the concept of guest experience in luxury specialist accommodation, identifying how guest experience is created, staged and managed, and the impacts that the accommodation experience has on the guest’s perception of authenticity. The project will investigate specialist luxury accommodation in Australia and define the role that this type of accommodation has in shaping authentic tourism experiences. This qualitative study will firstly aim to explore the concept of guest experience in luxury specialist accommodation, by answering the following questions:

1. How is guest experience created, staged and managed in luxury specialist accommodation?
 - 1.1. How is guest experience in luxury specialist accommodation perceived by guests, managers and employees?
 - 1.2. How is guest experience created?
 - 1.3. How is guest experience staged and managed by the host?
 - 1.4. What are the guest experience factors that most influence satisfaction in the tourist?

The study will consequently attempt to explore the relationship between guest experience and perception of authenticity to heighten guest satisfaction. The following questions will be investigated:

2. What is the relationship between guest experience in luxury specialist accommodation and tourist’s perception of Authenticity?
 - 2.1. To what degree tourists perceive the experience of luxury specialist accommodation as being authentic?
 - 2.2. What are the factors that most influence the perception of authenticity of the guest experience amongst tourists?
 - 2.3. How do perceptions differ amongst tourists, managers and employees?

The methodological framework of the study will be based on an interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative study will utilise a multiple-case study methodology, chosen to present the comparison and analysis of multiple specific cases of Australian luxury specialist accommodation, including luxury lodges, camps and other non-traditional forms of accommodation. Yin (2013 p.3) defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context”. The case study method is often employed in interpretivist qualitative research, in fact, as Veal (2005, p.170) states, most of social research is a case study as it is “geographically and temporarily unique”.

Given the difficulties in categorising speciality lodging, properties will be selected based on the following criteria: Properties will be small to medium in size, offering key luxury standards in infrastructure, service, food and wine and believed to be delivering unforgettable experience in

Australia's most inspiring and unique locations. Even though purposive (or non-probability) sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to select a purposeful sample of participants and provide the best context to investigate the problem and understand the research questions (Creswell, 2003), ultimately participation will be based on the willingness of each property to participate in the project.

Multiple methods will be employed in the collection and analysis of data. Multiple methods are seen as strength in case study research and commonly employed to provide validation and a certain degree of representation of the project design and the research context under investigation (Johansson, 2013; Veal, 2005). The utilisation of multiple methods will enable the researcher to take advantage of a number of participants' perspectives and to observe behaviours in natural settings (Johansson, 2013). The methods chosen for this proposed research are in-depth semi-structured interviews, arranged in each participating property and conducted on a one-to-one basis, and researcher observations. Based on the interpretivist paradigm chosen for the study, during the data collection the researcher, or participant, will be identified as observer, the role of the researcher will be known. This will provide an insider's point of view of the context under investigation, as well as the dynamics between tourists and hosts, and allow the researcher to collect information as it is revealed (Creswell, 2003). As the role of the researcher will be known by the informants, the researcher will, in fact, be able to keep an observation journal that will assist in the data collection and analysis (Veal, 2005).

Based on the multiple-case study approach chosen, analysis will initially aim to provide a description of each case and correlated themes (Flick, 2002; Creswell, 2003). The data analysis will identify descriptions and key themes within the specific setting and relationships under investigation (Creswell, 2003; Flick, 2002; Veal, 2005). The data will then be analysed through thematic coding in order to identify common themes across the cases (Flick, 2002; Veal, 2005; Creswell, 2003). To facilitate the analysis the researcher will utilise NVivo, a software specifically designed for qualitative research, to categorise and analyse the data collected, as well as manual methods of analysis.

Conclusion and implications

This paper suggests the existence of a relationship between the concept of guest experience and perception of authenticity, which could impact the attainment of heightened guest satisfaction in specialist luxury accommodation. As customers become more willing to spend their money on authentic, enriching experiences, rather than luxury features and services, businesses will need to find alternative ways to achieve customer satisfaction. This could include seeing guest experience from a different angle, by taking in consideration the effects that accommodation guest experience has on the tourist's perception of authenticity. This exploratory project aims to address the knowledge gaps present in the concepts of authenticity, guest experience and luxury specialist accommodation.

Additionally, this project has the potential to provide the industry and its operators with a blueprint of best practice on guest experience creation and management aiming toward the satisfaction of a more demanding, discerning and hedonistic customer in a highly competitive market.

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