

Authenticity and Tourism: What TripAdvisor Reviews Reveal About Authentic Travel to Marrakech

Larbi Safaaa, Khalid El Housni and François Bédard

Abstract Ubiquitous in commercials and tourism brochures, the term authenticity is used in a wide array of meanings ranging from objective to subjective. In an attempt to overcome this deficiency, this article aims to identify how tourists define the authenticity of a travel experience. For this, it engages in a semantic analysis of reviews posted in TripAdvisor by travelers to Marrakech and its surroundings. The platform was chosen among others due to its currently predominant role in assisting tourists and helping them share their experiences. A total of 361 reviews were collected from 160 tourism establishments—40 each of four types of establishments, being the riad guest house, hotel, restaurant, and rural guest house—selected from the ranking of the best tourism establishments proposed by TripAdvisor. The three dimensions of authenticity found in the literature—originality, singularity and identity—were then associated with the four types of tourist accommodations. The “originality” dimension proved to be strongly associated with riad guest houses, the “singularity” dimension with hotels and restaurants, and the “identity” dimension with rural guest houses.

Keywords Authenticity · Marrakech · Tripadvisor · Originality · Singularity · Identity

L. Safaaa (✉) · K.E. Housni
Ecole Supérieure de Technologie D’Essaouira, Cadi Ayyad University,
Essaouira, Morocco
e-mail: safaa.larbi@uca.ma

K.E. Housni
e-mail: khalid.elhousni@uca.ma

F. Bédard
Ecole Des Sciences de Gestion, UQAM, Montréal, Canada
e-mail: bedard.francois@uqam.ca

1 Introduction

Considered essential, the concept of authenticity is a key topic in the business world and the scientific community alike. Authenticity appears to have become an important, or even determinant, attribute in the choices and actions of consumers (Cova & Cova, 2001) and a major strategic tool for differentiation, positioning and the overall evaluation for brands, products and tourism destinations (Camus, 2000). Authenticity is often used as a selling point and is employed in efforts to give meaning to experiences and urban or rural sites. In search of the authenticity deemed lost in the course of industrialisation and modernisation, tourists often use the adjective ‘authentic’ when talking about their travel experiences. However, they do not necessarily have a common definition of that word. Whether used to refer to a cognition or emotion of originality, ancestral tradition or the notion of otherness, be it for personal reasons or in a business context, the term authenticity embodies the myth of an imaginary of the other, a credo of an alternative tourism, or a grounded and rooted lifestyle from a time gone by (Badot & Cova, 2003; Amirou, 1995).

While the quest for authenticity is certainly not new, it has probably never been as sought for and requested as today. Indeed, authenticity has become a topic of scientific debate within and between those academic disciplines that are able to exert some influence on the tourism sector. An analysis of articles on authenticity testifies to the research attention that the concept has drawn from a number of authors from various disciplines. However, many gray areas remain to be clarified. To our knowledge, little research to date has analyzed the semantic meanings of authenticity in the mediated discourse of tourists. We cite the case of Mkono (2013), who through a netnographic analysis performs a comparison of the perception of authenticity held by Western tourists on the one hand and African tourists on the other.

The relationship between authenticity and tourism is not new. Ever since the seminal writings of MacCannell from the 1970s (1976, 1973), the concept has not ceased to arouse the curiosity of researchers hailing from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, ethnology and marketing.

Tourism has entered a phase of profound change not only with the advent of Web 3.0 and the development of the semantic web but also with the gradual empowerment of consumers through social media. The latter have become crucial interfaces for establishing lasting relationships with clients and for triggering electronic word-of-mouth communication. In this new era, consumers are no longer considered to be merely recipients. Instead they are seen as partners who are to be inspired and relied on, especially when it comes to developing the branding of a destination.

Exegesis, literary criticism or content analysis—all these methods aim to “get the texts to talk,” that is to say, to find out how to read and comment on them, or to extract their meaning. That approach is very old and derives from a longstanding literary tradition. The general method of semantic analysis subscribes to the

principles of distributional semantics established by Bloomfield (1933) and developed in the context of multiple streams of linguistics, including that of applied linguistics. Distributional semantics provides a linguistic basis for the automatic semantic analysis of textual data. Applied to the lexical field, distributional semantics assumes that terms having a similar contextual distribution (context) have similarity in terms of meaning. In this way, through the study of co-occurrences of a term and of the contexts favouring (or not) its appearance, it becomes possible to capture its semantic behaviour and clarify its meaning.

The literature review revealed two findings about the concept of authenticity. One, two scientific disciplines, namely anthropology and marketing, predominate in imposing their approach to this concept. Secondly, there is a definitional deficit as well as a fragmentation of the definition of authenticity, which is characterized by a split between intrinsic signals (experiences, characteristics of objects, etc.) and extrinsic signals (explicit messages and discreet signals, etc.).

To shed light on the concept of authenticity, this article presents a semantic analysis conducted of the reviews posted by travellers in TripAdvisor of riad guest houses (A riad is an ornately decorated traditional house, most of these buildings have been converted into guest houses), hotels or restaurants in Marrakech or of rural guest houses around Marrakech. The article includes a description of the theoretical framework, a methodology, and a presentation and discussion of the results, and ends with a conclusion on the contributions and limitations of this work and suggestions of avenues for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework: Authenticity and Tourism, Polysemic Richness and a Proliferation of Theories

Authenticity is a polymorphic concept and has different facets. Camus (2003, 2004) discusses a number of these facets, from objective and subjective to correlated, and proposes a hybrid model based on the three dimensions originality, singularity and identity. The quest for authenticity is certainly not new, though it has probably never been as much in demand. MacCannell (1973) introduced the concept of authenticity in tourism studies by associating it with modernity. The author argues that in the era of modernity, individuals, removed from 'real life', cut off from their roots and alienated, conceive of reality and authenticity as belonging to other periods of history or other purer and simpler lifestyles. Badot and Cova (2003) note a shift from values revolving around the future and 'the other' to the past and the local. 'The allure of the past and proximity seems increasingly to outweigh that of a glitzy future of an interconnected planet' (Badot & Cova, 2003, p. 85).¹ However, what exactly fascinates tourists about the traditional and the ancestral? Usually, viewing something as authentic means to perceive it as being defined and known. It

¹Our translation.

is this trait that gives the genuine product the typicality that allows it to be recognised and shared (Dion et al., 2010). The notion of the origin evokes a positively marked history, a particular symbolic value and a sublimated past (Kessous, 2009). Camus (2002) identified six authentic realms of originality. Origin may refer to a time (archaeological origin), a creator (inspirational origin), place (spatiological origin), a culture (ritualised origin), nature (natural origin) or a technique or technology (technical or technological origin).

The perceived contrast, singularity and distinction of the object in relation to surrounding objects seem to accentuate the perceived effect of authenticity. According to Durkheim, “[i]f societies need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as ‘sacred,’ singularization is one means to this end”² (1915, cited by Filser, 1994: 209). According to Belk (1995), singularity is the characteristic of a thing that is unique in its category, that has no equivalent, and that becomes a rare and sacred good. Rosselin (1994), for his part, associates authenticity with a process of rupture in the sense that authenticity is all the more prominent when it is unique and surrounded by indiscriminate, homogeneous, ordinary, common and ordinary elements. For MacCannell (1973), the tourist in search of authenticity seeks “the other,” even if that other is staged.

On a different note, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) remind us that “authenticity [...] is part of a long philosophical tradition concerned with what it means to be human, what it means to be happy, and what it means to be oneself” (p. 300). The authors underline the ontological character of authenticity by defining it not as a social fact but rather as an issue related to the human experience, in other words, a person’s existence, states of feeling and concerns (Turner & Manning, 1988). Thus, existential authenticity is defined as a special state of being in which one is true to oneself, or, according to Selwyn (1996), a feeling resulting from the experience of one’s real self, a liminal state in which the individual feels to be in direct and intimate contact with him or herself. In this sense, Taylor (2001) argues that human existence finds its meaning only in the affirmation of the self, its own nature and its autonomy.

3 Methodological Framework

Within one decade, TripAdvisor has profoundly changed the tourism sector, including the ways in which consumers book tourism services (e.g., transportation, accommodations, restaurants, entertainment). For example, consumers today no longer rely only on the official statements issued by the tourism providers. Instead they want to know what others tourists are saying.

Tourists are more and more inclined to share their experiences on social networks as well as with the public. These expressions are invaluable to tourism

²Our translation.

Table 1 Distribution of the sample

Type of establishment	Number of establishments	Number of selected reviews
Hotel	40	57
Rural guest house	40	93
Riad guest house	40	134
Restaurant	40	77
Total	160	361

businesses and destinations. TripAdvisor is one of the most reputable platforms in the tourism industry. In its Travellers' Choice 2015³ awards, Marrakech tops the list of the best tourism destinations in the world. Their rating was conducted following the collection of more than 200 million traveller reviews and opinions about hotels, restaurants and attractions for one year, namely 2014, using various criteria of quality and quantity.

The reviews we selected had been posted in TripAdvisor between February 2014 and the end of January 2015 by travellers to Marrakech who had gone to one of the following four types of tourism establishments: riad guest houses, hotels, restaurants and rural guest houses (see Table 1). The choice of these establishments was based on the diversity of the types of clients they together represent, which is evidenced by the reviews analysed in the present document.

The main selection criterion of the reviews was that they revolve around, either explicitly or implicitly, the concept of authenticity. The reviews were also selected in consideration of the seasonality of the tourism year, so as to avoid possible biases due to seasonal variations.

The data collection method consisted of identifying TripAdvisor reviews having one or more than one occurrence of the term *authenticity* or of derivatives of the term such as *authentic* or *authentically*. A total of 361 reviews were collected from 160 tourism establishments—comprised of, 40 each, the four types of establishments, being Riad guest house, hotel, restaurant, rural guesthouse—selected from the ranking of the best tourism establishments proposed by TripAdvisor. The choice was to serve as a representative sample of tourism establishments from which to collect the body of customer reviews.

The analysis of the reviews involved computing frequency and proximity statistics of words used in the text body and was performed using the software IRAMUTEQ (version 0.7 alpha 2). Referred to as lexicometry, or simply text analysis, such an analysis can be conducted with a number of methods for reorganising text sequences and creating statistics on words using segmentation (Salem, 1986). For Reinert (1983), the study of repetitions in a discourse allows to become aware of ideological trends, conflict zones, disruptions, rapprochements or oppositions, which he termed 'lexical worlds'.

³<http://www.tripadvisor.fr/TravelersChoice-Destinations-cTop-g1>, consulted on April 27, 2015.

Use of the software IRAMUTEQ requires organising the data from the selected reviews according to specific variables. In this research, the variables are the types of tourism establishments about which the reviews were posted, being riad guest houses, hotels, restaurants and rural guest houses. After entering the data according to these four variables, the software performed an automatic analysis that deconstructed the original text and reorganised it based on the repetition and sequence of words, generating a result that required further interpretation by the researcher.

4 Results and Discussion

In the following section, we will present a discussion of the results generated by IRAMUTEQ for the tourism destination Marrakech.

4.1 Results

The final body of data consists of 15,873 occurrences and of 2,362 different forms (Forms represent words, numbers and all unrecognised forms used in a text). The functions of text statistics (lists and counts) helped to highlight the frequency of words used in a descending order. The results are based on tools offered by the software for visualising the broader themes outlined by the active forms (By default, the active forms in the software represent all kinds of words except: adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, onomatopoeia, demonstrative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, relative pronouns, prepositions and auxiliary verbs) of the body of data.

The IRAMUTEQ analysis method allows to identify the classes of meaning, namely on the basis of the most meaningful words, that represent the dominant ideas and themes of the body of data. The software also employs the Reinert method (Fig. 1), which allows to realise a classification of terms; more specifically, it runs a factorial correspondence analysis that deconstructs the original text and reorganises it based on word repetition and sequence.

In our case, the method resulted in four classes that correspond to the four variables used in this research: Class 1 corresponds to the variable riad guest house; class 2 to the variable hotel; class 3 to the variable restaurant; and class 4 to the variable rural guest house. For each class, the software generated a lexical summary in order to detect variations around the richness of the vocabulary used in that class.

Class 4 (rural guest houses), comprising 22.6% of the forms, is the main branch of the dendrogram (diagram of Fig. 1). The three remaining classes in the second branch are divided into two branches: Class 1 (riad guest houses); class 3 (restaurants), with 51.2% of the forms; and class 2 (hotels), with 26.3% of the forms. This classification into three branches shows the existence of three different lexical worlds.

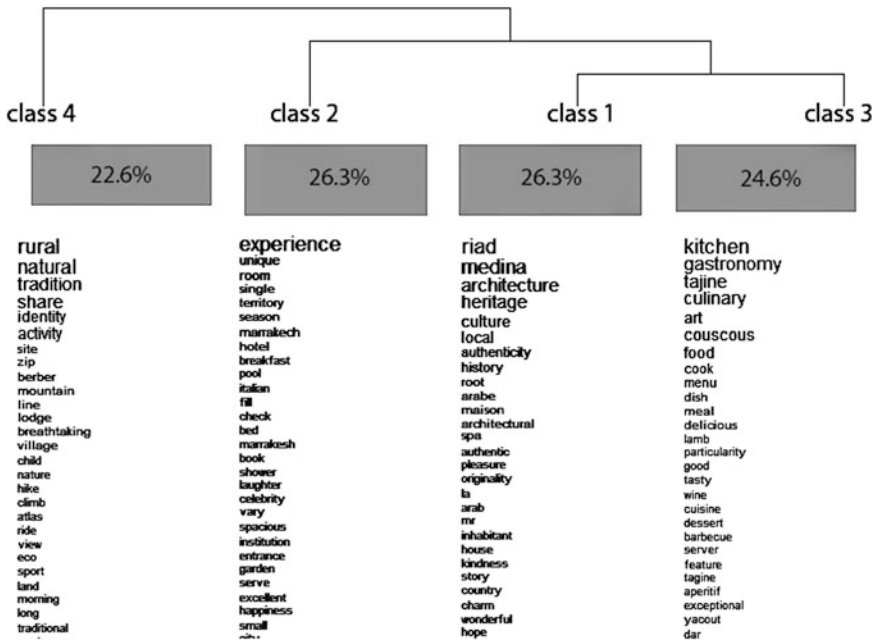


Fig. 1 Representation of classes of the TripAdvisor reviews using the Reinert method (Source IRAMUTEQ)

To illustrate how these three lexical worlds are distributed, Fig. 2 shows how these values are distributed along the x-axis and the y-axis.

On the x-axis, representing 40.19% of the body of data, class 4 (negative x-axis) is clearly separate from classes 1 and 3 (positive x-axis), with class 2 being in the center.

On the y-axis, representing 31.06% of the body of data, class 1 (positive y-axis) is clearly separate from classes 2 and 3 (negative y-axis), while class 4 is more centered.

The combination of these two axes offers a two-dimensional view of the text corpus, and distinguishes three zones: Firstly, a zone of positive x-axes and negative y-axes, on the bottom right, showing class 1 corresponding to the variable riad guest house; A central area consumed mainly by class 4 (rural guest houses), with negative x-axes and y-axes, half positive and negative; finally, a zone of positive and slightly negative coordinates, on the top right, showing class 2 (hotels) and class 3 (restaurants). These two classes appear, as expected, intertwined since they correspond to the same lexical world.

The positioning of each class in Fig. 3 allows for a quick visualization of the results.

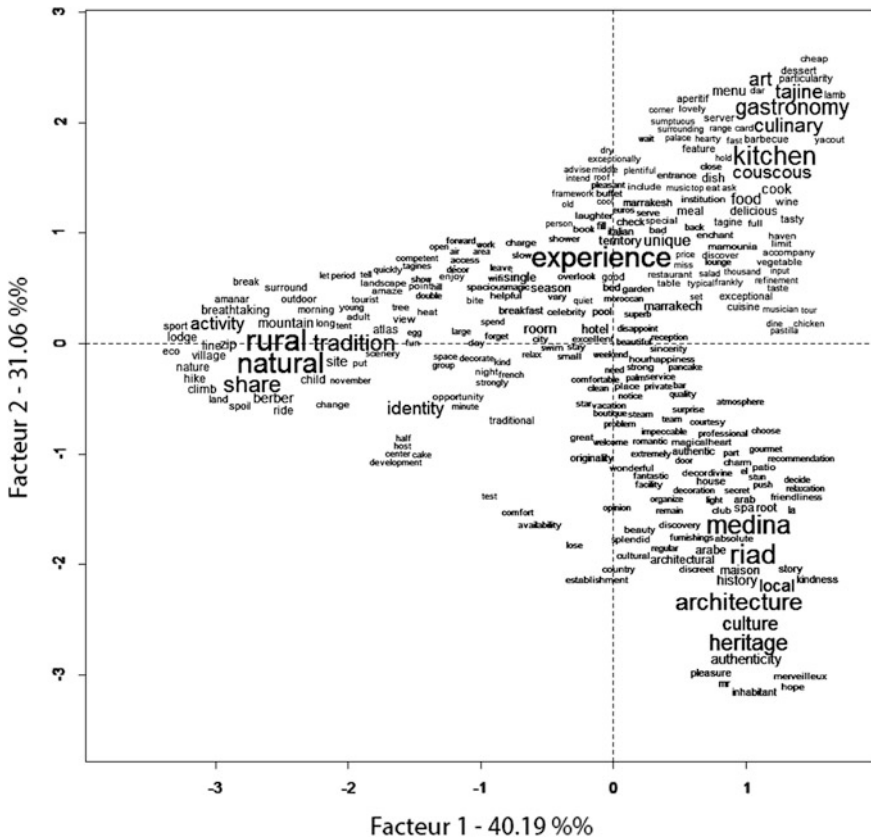


Fig. 2 Factorial correspondence analysis of the enlarged body of data (words and classes) (Source IRAMUTEQ)

The results presented in Figs. 1, 2 and 3 may be interpreted as follows: Class 1 (riads) presents active forms that refer primarily to medina (An Arabic term designating the old part of a town) and highlights the entire lexical field around culture and heritage. The word *architecture* is also very present in the reviews of tourists. Other words that appear in this first class, such as *authenticity*, *local* and *history*, readily conjure associations with *originality*, which constitutes one dimension of authenticity.

The following are examples of typical reviews on riad guest houses:

The riad is sumptuous, the decor is authentic, and the rooftop terraces where you can have breakfast, lunch and dinner offer a magnificent view of Marrakech.

Very well located riad. Lots of charm and a beautiful authentic and traditional architecture in the heart of the medina.

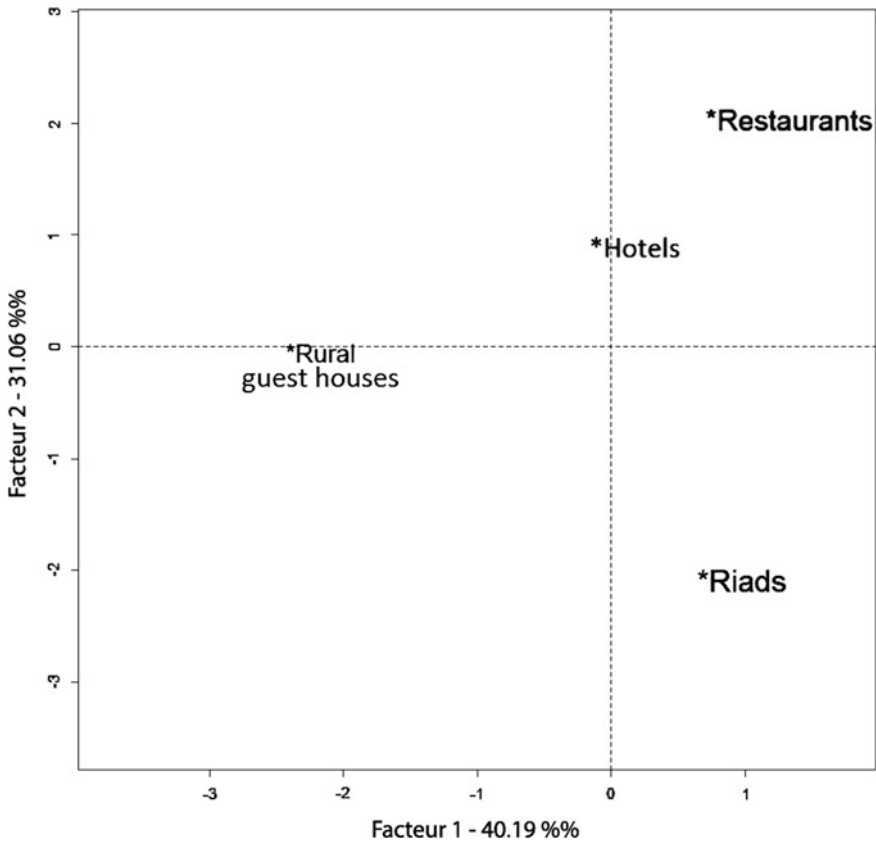


Fig. 3 Factorial correspondence analysis of the variables of the TripAdvisor reviews (Source IRAMUTEQ)

The main active forms presented by class 2 (hotels) are *experience*, *unique* and *Marrakech*. This textual composition demonstrates a link with another dimension of authenticity, that of *singularity*.

The following are some examples of hotel reviews:

The setting of the hotel is truly unique and authentic, both with regard to the greenery and the architecture!

An authentic and singular haven of peace... we spent a wonderful and sunny week here in April. The gardens are magnificent and the city is a veritable showcase of historical monuments.

The words evoked for class 3 (restaurants), revolving around the theme of gastronomy, were *Couscous* (Moroccan traditional dish), *cooking* and *culinary art*. This lexical world obviously refers to the dimension *singularity*, which is confirmed by the rapprochement between class 2 and class 3 in the representation of Fig. 2.

The following are examples of reviews of restaurants.

I can highly recommend having an authentic Moroccan meal. Couscous with lamb, a true delicacy, the cuisine is sophisticated... excellent Moroccan flavours.

Great authentic place, beautiful setting and exceptional cuisine... We also liked the tea on the terrace with a splendid view of the Koutoubia Mosque.

Class 4 (rural guest houses) is relatively isolated from the other classes (Fig. 2). The main active forms of this class are: *rural*, *natural*, *sharing* and *identity*. This textual composition very much approximates the element *projection and identity*.

The following are some examples of reviews on rural guest houses:

Authentic and inspiring walk in the mountains, typical beautiful scenery... Very pleasant and remote while being within reasonable distance from Marrakech. In short, a return to the source!

A beautiful setting for resting and relaxing with a good meal and an intimate, absolutely stunning night view that allowed us to discover the authentic marrakech from another angle.

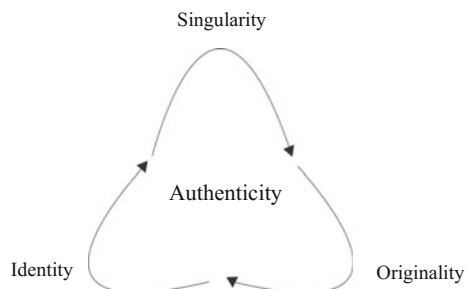
4.2 Discussion: Authenticity as a Set of Components that Feed on Each Other

Illustrated in the form of a triangle (Fig. 4), the factorial analysis of the variables of the collection of reviews shows the existence of three separate lexical worlds. These correspond to three commonly accepted notions of authenticity found in the literature, being originality, singularity and identity.

The analysis also shows how the meaning of authenticity shifts continuously, albeit confined to one lexical corpus, suggesting that the term has a chameleon-type characteristic in that it adapts to the type of establishment in question in the review.

By being organized in a triangle, the three semantic worlds originality, singularity and identity do not mutually exclude each other. Instead, they feed on the shifting borders just as they feed, in a transitive manner, on the affective, cognitive and symbolic dimensions emanating from or attributed to objects and experiences of the trip. This transitivity moves in a circular manner between the three lexical

Fig. 4 Authenticity as dynamic and triangular set of characteristics



worlds. For example, an original character could contribute to the product a feature of singularity or an exceptional trait. This is the case with products to which one feels attached because they remind us of certain stages of our history (Cova and Cova, 2001).

The following review from a tourist of a rural guesthouse illustrates how the characteristics of the environment and the original context of the hosting structure inspire to a projection of the self.

A beautiful and inspiring walk on the mountain that is typical with its beautiful scenery... original and authentic architecture made of rammed earth, isolated while being within a reasonable distance from Marrakech. Simply put, a return to the source. Here I can find myself.

5 Conclusion

The questioning of the notion of authenticity seems to be timely. Indeed, the quest for authenticity is a salient feature of the current tourism demand, as targeted by marketing research studies. The words *authentic* or *authenticity* function as a selling point, meeting the expectations of Western tourists in search of roots. In that context, the term *authenticity* is increasingly used by tourism operators as a catch-all. Subsequently, over used, the term tends to fuel ambiguity.

It is now understood that this ambiguity is due to the internal polysemy of the term *authenticity* as well as the semantic richness of its lexical and syntactic usage. This explains the difficult bridge to gap between semantic diversity on the one hand and social mimetism on the other. However, as indicated by Babadzan (2001), the globalization of the need for authentic local features would merely be yet another paradox of current-day globalization. As we have shown, the use of the term *authenticity*, semantically rich, prompts to further reflection on its use in order to improve its relevance and ensure that it confers the appropriate meaning to the objects and experiences presented in the promotional discourse of tourism professionals.

This work paves the way for further exploratory studies on the concept of authenticity in the context of tourism destinations and tourist experiences. A number of endogenous and exogenous criteria for authenticity have yet to be clearly defined. Future research could allow to deepen our knowledge on the cognitive and psychological dimensions of travellers in search for authentic experiences. The cognitive dimension refers to beliefs and knowledge about a destination, while the affective dimension refers to the emotions experienced around a destination.

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