

Staged or Real? An Interdisciplinary Study of Cultural Authenticity in Tourism

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IDS 300W: Introduction to Interdisciplinary Theory and Concepts

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Abstract

Authenticity has become a central issue in modern tourism as travelers increasingly seek meaningful cultural experiences while tourism industries often rely on staged performances. This paper uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine how authenticity is constructed, perceived, and negotiated through four disciplines: anthropology, psychology, geography, and sociology. Anthropology emphasizes community defined cultural meaning and the importance of local voices, while psychology focuses on tourists' emotional experiences and perceived value. Geography highlights how authenticity is shaped by place, spatial relationships, and interactions within tourism environments. Sociology explains how modern identity, social disconnection, and power dynamics influence the tourist experience. Together, these perspectives reveal that authenticity is not fixed but constructed through interactions between tourists, communities, and tourism spaces. The synthesis shows that genuine cultural authenticity occurs when tourism practices prioritize cultural sustainability and minimize commercial staging, allowing tourists to connect more deeply with local culture. This integrated approach provides a more complete understanding of how authenticity functions in tourism and why community centered practices are essential for preserving cultural heritage.

Introduction

Authenticity has become one of the most debated concepts in tourism studies because tourists increasingly want experiences that feel “real,” meaningful, and connected to the local culture. However, the tourism industry often responds by staging cultural performances, shaping attractions around visitor expectations rather than community realities. As a result, authentic cultural practices can become distorted or commercialized, leaving both tourists and local residents dissatisfied. Four disciplines anthropology, psychology, geography, and sociology offer different insights into how authenticity is constructed, performed, experienced, and interpreted. Together, they help explain why tourists often mistake staged experiences for the real thing and how communities struggle to protect their cultural identity within tourism spaces. **Tourists can only experience genuine cultural authenticity when tourism practices prioritize local voices and minimize staged, commercialized representations of culture.**

Interdisciplinary Approach / Method

This research relies on an interdisciplinary approach because authenticity in tourism is a complex cultural, emotional, social, and spatial issue that no single discipline can fully explain. Using Repko and Szostak’s 10-step interdisciplinary method (Szostak, 2020), I identified anthropology, psychology, geography, and sociology as essential fields for understanding how tourists interpret authenticity and how communities experience tourism impacts. My earlier assignments helped me reach adequacy in each field through tables of disciplinary insights, conflict analysis, and synthesis mapping, especially the visual model showing the divide between staged vs. lived cultural practices. Assignment 5 then helped me build common ground by showing how

different disciplines connect and where they conflict regarding authenticity's meaning and purpose . By integrating insights from these diverse fields, I create a more complete explanation of what makes cultural tourism experiences feel authentic or not.

Anthropology: Cultural Meaning, Community Voices, and Authenticity

Anthropology views authenticity as something deeply rooted in local cultural meaning, lived practices, and the perspectives of the community. Uslu et al. emphasize that residents are not just background figures in tourism they play an essential role in defining what is culturally authentic. They argue that cultural heritage tourism must consider how residents interpret tourism activities and the meaning they attach to their traditions, stating that local perceptions are “crucial for the development of cultural heritage tourism and ensuring its sustainability” (Uslu, 2023).

Anthropology also helps explain why staged performances often feel inauthentic: these performances remove cultural practices from their everyday social context. Instead of being meaningful community rituals, they turn into scripted products designed for tourist consumption. Bauman describes this loss of rootedness more broadly, arguing that modern tourists “drift” through cultures and identities rather than being grounded members of a community.

From an anthropological perspective, authenticity is not a product to be packaged, it is something created within the community. When tourism companies generate staged experiences without collaborating with locals, cultural meaning becomes distorted or lost. Anthropology therefore pushes the argument that tourism must prioritize local voices, cultural sustainability, and community defined authenticity.

Psychology: Emotions, Memory, and Perceived Authenticity

Psychology approaches authenticity differently. Instead of focusing on cultural meaning, psychology focuses on how tourists emotionally experience an activity or place. Zhang et al. found that authentic tourism experiences generate strong emotions, create memorable recollections, and even influence environmentally responsible behavior. They explain that when tourists feel an experience is authentic, “tourist emotion and recollection” (Tao Zhang, 2022) shape how valuable the experience becomes to them.

In psychology, authenticity depends on perceived value. Even if an experience is staged, tourists may still label it as authentic if it matches their expectations or feels emotionally meaningful. This creates a conflict with anthropology: tourists may be satisfied with a curated performance, while local residents may view it as harmful or inaccurate. Psychological research highlights why staged attractions remain popular because they are designed to trigger emotional satisfaction, even if they are not culturally grounded.

Psychology contributes an important insight: tourists do not automatically seek the “real”; they seek emotionally fulfilling experiences. This discipline helps explain why authenticity is often shaped by tourist expectations rather than community definitions.

Geography: Space, Place, and Negotiated Authenticity

Geography emphasize the spatial and contextual nature of authenticity. Wang’s foundational work shows that authenticity is not always about whether something is objectively real. Instead, he identifies existential authenticity, where tourists feel authentic through personal experiences of being, connection, and freedom, even if the cultural object itself is staged .

Rickly expands this idea by showing that authenticity is tied to tourism geographies meaning it emerges from how people interact with place, heritage, and cultural landscapes. She writes that “authenticity has a unique relationship with tourism geographies,” (Jillian Rickly, 2023) meaning authenticity is constructed through spatial relationships, cultural power, and interactions between hosts and guests .

Geography makes clear that authenticity is negotiated. It depends on the physical space, tourist expectations, heritage representation, and community participation. If tourism spaces prioritize commercialization over cultural meaning, then authenticity becomes shallow and performative. Geography helps us understand how tourist spaces shape what authenticity looks like and how easily it becomes staged or commodified.

Sociology: Identity, Modernity, and the Tourist Experience

Sociology focuses on social behavior, identity formation, and how tourism reflects broader patterns in society. Bauman describes the tourist as a symbol of modern identity someone who lacks rootedness and seeks temporary meaning in short-term experiences. He argues that “the tourist is a stranger... liable to loss of identity,” (Bauman, 1996) contrasting this with the pilgrim who has deep cultural grounding .

This insight explains why tourists often gravitate toward staged authenticity: it provides temporary meaning in a world where identity feels unstable. Sociology also helps illuminate power relations within tourism specifically, who has the authority to define what is authentic. Often, industry leaders, not local communities, shape tourist expectations. This can lead to tension between cultural preservation and tourist consumption.

Sociology contributes the understanding that authenticity is affected by social disconnection, identity searching, and the way tourism functions within modern society. It reinforces the need to re-center local voices to create more meaningful cultural encounters.

Applications and Syntheses

Bringing these four disciplines together reveals both conflicts and points of connection.

Conflicts Between Disciplines

Anthropology vs. Psychology: Anthropology prioritizes community-defined authenticity, while psychology emphasizes tourist perceptions and emotional satisfaction. What is authentic to tourists may feel exploitative to locals.

Anthropology vs. Tourism Studies: Anthropology criticizes staged performances, while tourism studies recognize that existential authenticity can still feel meaningful even if the activity is staged.

Sociology vs. Psychology: Sociology stresses social identity and disconnection, while psychology focuses on individual emotional experience.

Geography vs. all fields: Geography highlights the spatial negotiation of authenticity, which complicates the more individual or cultural interpretations from psychology and anthropology.

Common Ground Across Disciplines

Despite their disagreements, the fields share several connections:

Authenticity is constructed, not fixed. All disciplines agree that authenticity depends on interpretation whether from tourists, communities, or spatial relationships.

Tourist expectations shape outcomes. Psychology, Geography, and sociology all highlight the powerful role of tourist imagination.

Community voices matter. Anthropology and geography stress cultural sustainability and place-based meaning, which aligns with sociology's interest in identity.

Authenticity is relational. Experiences emerge through interactions between tourists, locals, and tourism environments.

Integrated Explanation

By synthesizing these insights, we can create a more complete understanding of authenticity in tourism:

1. Tourists arrive with expectations and emotional needs (psychology).
2. Their interpretations are shaped by the spatial environment and how the destination is constructed (geography).
3. Locals evaluate authenticity based on cultural meaning and heritage (anthropology).
4. Tourism reflects broader social patterns of identity and modernity (sociology).

When these factors align, when tourists' desire for meaning meets community-defined cultural experiences within respectful, place-based tourism environments, genuine cultural authenticity

becomes possible. When tourism prioritizes profit over people, authenticity is replaced with staged performances.

Conclusion

Authenticity in tourism is far more complicated than whether a cultural activity is “real” or “fake.” Anthropology shows that authenticity depends on cultural meaning and community voice. Psychology reveals that tourists often judge authenticity based on emotion and perceived value. Geography demonstrates that place, space, and context shape how authenticity is negotiated. Sociology explains why modern tourists seek identity through temporary cultural encounters. Together, these disciplines show that genuine cultural authenticity happens when tourism centers the people who live the culture not the performances created for visitors. When local voices guide tourism development, tourists can connect more deeply with the culture, and communities can preserve what makes their heritage meaningful.

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Extra Credit Reflection

If I had to do this paper again, I would start my research process much earlier and create a more structured plan for finding sources within each discipline. At first, I struggled to understand how anthropology, psychology, geography, and sociology connected, so I focused too much on summarizing each source separately instead of looking for relationships between them. After completing Assignments 3 and 5, I realized how helpful it was to keep all of my disciplinary insights organized in tables. Next time, I would build those tables right away because they helped me see conflicts and common ground more clearly.

One thing that was successful was using Repko and Szostak's 10-step method (Szostak, 2020) as a roadmap. It kept me focused on developing adequacy in each discipline, and it reminded me that interdisciplinarity is not just about collecting sources it's about integrating them. I also learned that writing an interdisciplinary paper requires constant revising. My first draft leaned too heavily on psychology, and later I had to rebalance the paper to make sure anthropology and geography were equally represented. If I rewrote this paper, I would spend more time drafting the synthesis section because that was the most challenging part. Still, I feel like this assignment helped me better understand how different fields contribute to a bigger conversation, and it improved the way I approach complex topics in academic writing.