

Current Issues in Tourism

Response to Yeoman et al.: Competitive advantage through “authenticity”: An assessment of Scotland’s tourism prospects

A key role of National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) is to understand consumer trends and use them to formulate strategic plans. The more adventurous NTOs involve themselves in evaluating big picture mega-trends and then applying them by targeting relevant and viable market segments. Periodically the process tips over into serious destination re-positioning. Fiji, for example, initiated a major shift to ecotourism and village-based tourism from its established position as a resort-based destination (Ayala, 1995). More recently Malta signalled a move from “blue tourism” (sun, sea and sand tourism) to “grey tourism” (with a stronger emphasis on heritage) (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2005). Within this issue of *Tourism Management*, the authors of “the Authentic Tourist” make an implicit pitch for Scotland to redirect its marketing efforts towards authenticity-seeking tourists.

They do not explicitly advocate authenticity as Scotland’s “brand equity proposition”. The latter has been designated by VisitScotland as “human, enduring and dramatic”. It is identified as one of four “profiles of visitor types” to be targeted (the others are business tourism, the need for cultural capital and the desire for new experiences). The authors identify authenticity-seeking behaviour as a key determinant of consumer decision-making capable of transformation into strategic marketing. The range of supporting evidence includes a brief literature review drawing upon diverse sources from Dostoevsky and Plato to self-help books by McGraw (2004) and Godin (2005), some comment on tourism in Scotland, an explanation of 10 emerging “mega-trends” and finally two case studies.

This rejoinder is a critical assessment of the merits of the implied strategic shift. It reviews the relevant authenticity literature and the circumstances confronting Scotland as a destination. The present author has been an Australian resident for 20 years, but returns regularly to his native Scotland. It is argued that whilst “authenticity-seeking” behaviour characterises a growing number of consumers in developed markets, explicit use of the term as a rationale for strategic marketing would be unwise. The reasons are that the literature is decidedly inconclusive and contradictory about authenticity as a strategic direction and that the prospects of successful implementation in Scotland are overestimated given the paradoxes of the post-devolution era.

The authors of the “Authentic Tourist” deserve credit for identifying and investigating some significant mega-trends to underpin VisitScotland’s innovative destination positioning incorporating scenario planning and “visioning”. For a tourism-dependent and identity-seeking nation like Scotland, big picture thinking linked with scenario planning and market analysis is important for moving beyond the inevitable day-to-day tactics and manoeuvring that characterise tourism and the political process.

As has been common in the tourism literature where expectations have been attached to concepts such as “alternative” and “sustainable” tourism, the authors are proposing authenticity seeking as a catalyst for attracting higher yielding tourists undertaking activities which are positive for the destination. These include ethical tourism, community engagement and backward economic linkages, all of which feature prominently within the 10 mega-trends outlined by the authors.

The authors make only passing reference to the various contradictions and paradoxes evident within the authenticity literature. This literature has been a battleground between postmodernists and traditionalists with the former adopting a generally more benign view towards the merits of “inauthentic” experiences. Postmodernists question the validity of making value judgements about what is and is not authentic, as well as the motives of those charged with making such judgments (Bruner, 1994). In advocating a stronger engagement between tourism and the community, the authors assume the feasibility of achieving consensus within the destination about what is and is not authentic. It is argued here that to assume that such consensus is achievable is overambitious, given the nature and history of Scottish tourism and the infancy of the re-appraisal of the issues of identity post-devolution.

Within the literature, advocates of a semiotic approach to authenticity depict tourists as an “army of semioticians” which raises prospective dilemmas for tourism authorities. The labelling of sites and experiences as “authentic” involves mediation and according to critics detracts from what made these particular settings “authentic” in the first place (Culler, 1981). According to Culler “to be fully satisfying the sight needs to be certified as authentic. It must have markers of authenticity attached to it. Without these markers it could not be experienced as authentic” (Culler, 1981, p. 137). Authenticity seekers will need identifiers to guide them towards attractions designated as “authentic”.

To what extent is Scotland capable of delivering authentic tourism experiences consistently? Many recently independent European states are re-assessing their identity with some projecting this through marketing. However, the evidence of homogenisation and globalisation is all around, whether in Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia or Scotland with their ubiquitous Starbucks and McDonalds outlets. Even when supported by consumer research, special claims of “authenticity” are an invitation to make comparisons with the realities of lived experience surrounded by the evidence of globalisation. Success will largely be determined by the destination’s capacity to meet visitor expectations through experiences consistent with the claims of destination marketing. The claims must also be credible amongst residents. Despite various official classification and grading schemes designated to indicate quality, Scotland has always struggled to maintain consistent service standards. Given this experience, how realistic is it to attach an official designation to authenticity? In Scotland visitors are as likely to encounter *kitsch* tartan reproductions as they are authentic products. There are also the various hybrid and hard-to-categorise products such as the Tizer factory experience referred to in the paper.

Critics of authenticity view destination promotions as portraying “western stereotyped, biased and neo-colonialist imagery of the noble savage”, a concept dating back to Rousseau (Wang, 2000). The blockbuster movie *Braveheart* featuring Mel Gibson as William Wallace lends credibility to this interpretation, being a highly romanticised and revisionist interpretation of Scottish history. Those who might undertake a prospective authenticity assessment have minimal influence over such imagery, though such depictions through film also impact on resident and tourist perceptions, a fact acknowledged by the authors in the Orkney case study.

Why is the label “authentic” particularly problematic for Scotland, despite its apparent resonance amongst prospective visitors? When Sir Walter Scott stage-managed King George IV’s visit to Scotland dressed in full highland regalia during the height of the romantic era, he gave a major impetus to its reputation as a land of tartan-swathed highland clans, heather and mountains (Devine, 1999). Though Scotland’s tourism industry has subsequently capitalised on this imagery, the reality of 19th and 20th century Scotland was as a pioneering and highly industrialised society, built around iron, coal and shipbuilding. The juxtaposition of heavy industry with the romance of the highlands is a paradox of Scotland. Daily life for most Scots has involved an urban experience, not the glens and sea lochs of the tourist brochures. The grim housing estates beside the iconic Loch Lomond are emblematic of the juxtaposition. A recent conference on urban tourism highlighted the need to strengthen the profile of urban as opposed to rural and highland tourism in Scotland (Baum, 2003). Determining the “real” Scotland is important but unfinished business.

Positioning Scotland as a destination offering authentic experiences has some alignment with consumer trends, but

many contradictions on the supply side—highland versus lowland, urban versus rural and industrial versus agricultural. To deliver consistent “authentic” experiences would require a high level of agreement about what constitutes “authenticity” and the development of appropriate criteria. The concept of authenticity was originally associated with museums and with assessments of the objects within them (Wang, 2000). However, the range of products and experiences expected and encountered by contemporary tourists is diverse. How would a visit to the “Tizer” factory, which the authors acknowledge as a marginal version of authenticity, be labelled and classified? It is hard to imagine public agencies such as Historic Scotland or the National Trust playing a part in the assessment. Perhaps whisky distilleries, but a bottling plant for synthetic soft drinks?

How would an authenticity scheme secure popular support? Scots themselves are aware that what is often presented as “authentic Scottish experience” can be contrived. They may “suspend disbelief” about the authenticity dimension while enjoying an evening of so-called traditional Scottish entertainment (Matheson, 2005). Promoting “authentic Scotland” amongst Scots who are conscious of a degree of phoneyess as an unavoidable part of daily life and celebration is a risky proposition. A public campaign informing Scots about what makes their country authentic is going to struggle for credibility as well as to justify the costs of implementation. The alternative of focusing exclusively on marketing and ignoring community engagement undervalues the importance of community education that the authors have outlined.

The *Orkadian Ancestors and Fiddlers* case study provides an atypical though interesting example of the challenges of peripherality confronting Scotland, albeit located on the edge of Western Europe, the world’s most mature tourism market. Orkney is remote, relatively self-contained and more removed from the pressures of globalisation than mainland Scotland. Orkney’s outstanding qualities were confirmed in a recent VisitScotland public competition to nominate seven Scottish “wonders”—Orkney’s prehistoric remains were voted number five. Small island destinations offering more than the international clichés of swaying palms and beach (for example history and culture) may pursue exclusivity, as suggested in the case study, through the imposition of caps on visitor numbers and application of ecological taxes. However, the issues of peripherality and climate should be given particular consideration in Scotland. Extreme seasonality and high transport costs are obstacles to the feasibility of imposing taxes, which lead to price rises. Limiting the number of tourists during Orkney’s brief high season has some appeal, but during the other 10 months of the year the main challenge is likely to remain how to attract any significant visitation. Orkney is one of the more likely Scottish destinations to have credibility amongst authenticity seekers, but it is not emblematic of Scotland as a whole.

The second case study—*Ella Stewart Family Centre Holidays*—describes the setting for a holiday experience by

an extended family. The incorporation of the extended family connection and recognition of the diverse expectations of the individual travellers is instructive. However, the proposed centre is attempting to draw together too many disparate packaged elements, from farm-stay type experiences to religious tourism. It is implied that the Family Centre business model and the tourists who stay there facilitates the achievement of desirable destination objectives, consistent with the strategy of authenticity seeking. However, the case study raises many questions. If there are insufficient families like the Hughes and the visitor mix changes in the pursuit of financial viability, will the various socially desirable elements in the proposal be maintained? The proposed complex sounds politically correct, strong on social engineering and wishful thinking and financially improbable. Authenticity seekers would conceivably judge it to be packaged, contrived and of questionable appeal.

A key theme in the literature is that authenticity is highly complex and contested and is fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. Imposing a one-dimensional interpretation, supported by assessment criteria will not achieve the broader social objectives, whatever its marketing appeal. The proposed case studies attempt to demonstrate diversity and flexibility, but are ultimately unconvincing. Promoting the paradoxes, diversity and contradictions of Scotland is a greater communications challenge, but these dimensions make Scotland interesting. The term “authenticity” is neither embracing nor inclusive.

The search for authenticity and the associated debate correctly plays a part in Scotland’s post-devolution re-evaluation of its identity, drawing upon arts, sciences and politics. Whether or not it is backed up by consumer research, it should not, however, be adopted as the latest “buzz-word”, and pursued to seize a competitive advantage before some other destination takes the initiative.

Though short on substance, the much maligned UK “Cool Britannia” campaign at least had some credibility as a slogan—the word authenticity by contrast is distinctively short on marketing resonance. And focussing on sloganeering to consumers without first securing effective implementation at the product delivery end, risks creating a dissonance between expectations and reality for both residents and tourists.

So whilst the authors of the “Authentic Tourist” deserve credit for placing this issue on the agenda, a strong cautionary note should accompany any idea of transforming the term authenticity as a basis for national strategy.

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