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Experiential Authenticity in Heritage Museums

Abstract: Museums are important heritage attractions offering authentic cultural experiences. Nevertheless, little is known about how museums create experiential authenticity for their visitors. This study aims to address this lacuna by examining how authentic experiences are achieved through museum visits. Participant observations and semi-structured interviews were combined to generate insights into museum visitors' experiential authenticity. Based on qualitative investigations, a questionnaire-based survey was applied to confirm the structure of museum visit experience. The results demonstrate that authenticity in heritage museum visitation is characteristic of emotional, original, and interactive constructs or genres, which are positively correlated to form a hybridity. Museum visitors' experiential authenticity is evoked through material objects, demonstrations of craftsmanship, modern technology, and other forms of museum re-configuration. The paper also highlights theoretical and practical implications of this research, along with limitations for future studies.

Keywords: Experiential authenticity; Visitor experience; Heritage museum; Cultural tourism; China

1. Introduction

Museums are being increasingly recognized to be an important component of tourist attractions and leisure destinations (Kang & Gretzel, 2012; Prideaux & Kininmont, 1999; Tufts & Milne, 1999). Museum visits can be regarded as a kind of trip, and it is appropriate to explain visitors' experiences in museums as a type of tourist experience (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Sheng & Chen, 2012). However, as pointed out by Beverland and Farrelly (2010) and Blud (1990), museum operations have traditionally over-emphasized displays and paid scant attention to the experiential nature of museum visits. As museums have gradually begun to turn their attention to the provision of experiences for visitors (Chan, 2009), the relationship between tourists and museums has gradually attracted the attention of academics in both the museology and tourism fields.

Authenticity has been identified as an important attribute of heritage destinations (Fu, Kim & Zhou, 2015). Within tourism research, the concept of authenticity was originally applied to museums (Trilling, 2009). Museum collections have conventionally been considered to be collections of unbiased, authentic objects, with the provision of an authentic experience considered the core aim of the presentation and interpretation of museum exhibits (Davies & Prentice, 1995; Harrison, 1997; Prentice, 2001). In the post-modern era, innovative communication techniques (e.g. augmented reality technology) have been increasingly adopted by museums to enhance visitors' experience (Proctor, 2010; Rahaman & Tan, 2011). Historical fragments and narratives, as well as regional stories and legends, are being incorporated into on-site interpretations of the local past to increase the value of visitors' experiences. Post-modern tourists are actively participating in these story-telling experiences, building a personal understanding and making sense of their own museum experience (Fu et al., 2015). Therefore, according to co-creation logic (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), visitors' experiential authenticity in museum is now being co-produced by visitors and museum planners, curators, and managers.

Although research on visitors' experiences in museums is increasing (Schänzel & Carr, 2016), most previous studies have been conducted in Western countries, where museum systems were developed earlier and have been appreciated by the public for a long time (Hooper-Greenhill, 2013). There is a paucity of studies on visitors to public cultural facilities such as heritage museums

in the Chinese context. Notably, previous studies have almost exclusively concentrated on visitor experience in science, history, and art museums, offering limited understanding of visitors' behavior in heritage museum settings (Zhou, Shen, Wu, Wall & Shen, 2018) and, least of all, of the ways heritage museums create authentic experience for visitors. While existing empirical studies on authenticity largely rely on single-measurement-driven methods to examine correlations among object-related authenticity, existential authenticity, post-modern authenticity, motivation, and loyalty (Bryce, Curran, O'Gorman & Taheri, 2015; Lin, 2017; Lin & Liu, 2018; Park, Choi & Lee, 2019; Yi, Fu, Yu & Jiang, 2018), combined or mixed method approaches are likely to generate observations from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Furthermore, although authenticity is often seen as a negotiation of positions between visitors and service providers, previous research has also investigated how authenticity of museums and other heritage destinations are produced and showcased by a variety of stakeholders (Chhabra, 2010; Farrelly, Kock & Josiassen, 2019; Fu et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is relatively little research on how museum sectors' efforts are received and re-constructed by their audiences. Visitors are considered to be co-creators of active experiences and involvement (Antón et al., 2018), so it is important to understand visitors' evaluations of authenticity through their interactions with diverse museum offerings.

Having acknowledged the above gaps, this study expands the discussion of authenticity in heritage museums through examining Chinese visitors' experience in the post-modern era. Both inductive and deductive analyses are combined to facilitate sequential presentations of the results (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Specifically, this study attempts to clarify how authenticity is conceptualized and transmitted in the process of visitors' interactions and communication with museums' configurations (e.g. tour guides, on-site crafts-masters, modern interpretational technologies). The study aims to expand the understanding of authentic experiences of museum visitors. Conceptually, in alignment with this objective, the paper first synthesizes relevant research on visitor experience in museums, and then encapsulates the various theoretical streams of authenticity in the context of heritage tourism, with an emphasis on authenticity in museum visitation. Next, the methodology and empirical research results are presented. Finally, theoretical and practical implications of the study along with future research issues are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Visitor experience in museums

In general terms, the fundamental functions of museums are collecting and preserving heritage, displaying and propagating traditional culture, and educating the public (Sterry & Beaumont, 2006). Such facilities are widely considered to be educational venues for local residents, students, and families who are seeking knowledge about their community and culture (Schorch, Walton, Priest & Paradies, 2015; Wu & Wall, 2017). Guided by this philosophy, museums have mainly concentrated on the design, organization, and presentation of museum exhibits. Nonetheless, museums disseminate cognitive and affective knowledge to attract both locals and out-of-town visitors through embodied interactions and responses (Witcomb, 2007), indicating the heterogeneous nature of a museum experience. The over-emphasis on museums' informal education function has led to a neglect of the recreational potential of museums. Smith (2015) examined visitors' motivations for visiting museums and found that learning is not an all-encompassing motive. The theme of the 2009 International Museum Day was 'Museum and Tourism', which makes explicit contemporary museums' shift in focus from the collection and preservation of artifacts to the creation of visitor experiences (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

There have been many studies of visitors' experiences in museums. Most have focused on deconstructing visitors' pre-visit expectations and on-site experiences. Most visitors have been found to seek distinctive virtues possessed by museums that reflect local nature and history (Harrison, 1997). As outlined by Sheng and Chen (2012), museum visitors' expectations can be divided into five types: easiness and fun; cultural entertainment; personal identification; historical reminiscences; and escapism. Focusing on the aesthetic experience, Smith and Wolf (1996) examined visitors' preferences and intentions, and found that visitors' aesthetic consumption was highly variable. Visitors' numerous encounters in museums were shaped by both intellect and affect, personal links to the tangible objects and their symbolic meanings, and spiritual connections with memories of the place (Latham, 2013). In addition, studies have shown that participation in activities is crucial to enriching the visitor's experience (Liu, 2008). In a survey of visitors to an

interpretation museum, De Rojas and Camarero (2008) found that perceived quality and emotions were positively associated with visitors' satisfaction. The experience value of museum visitors was ascertained to be a co-creation process. They were motivated to visit by prior knowledge and interest, to seek information, and to revisit the museum after their initial experience (Antón, Camarero & Garrido, 2018). More systematically, Falk and Dierking (2016) developed an interactive experience model to illustrate the dynamic experience of museum visit, which decomposed visitors' experiences into three dimensions: the personal context, the physical context, and the social context. These three contexts worked together to help visitors make sense of museum exhibits (Lehn, 2006).

Two pivotal topics are emerging among academics. The first is the development of digital museums. Exhibits of museum collections have been gradually replaced by interactive technologies, such as virtual reality technology and augmented immersive content (Conn, 2011). Against this background, some studies have examined the effects of multi-media technology on visitors' museum experiences and evaluations. These meaningful interpretative tools have been found to significantly contribute to visitors' experiences (Rahaman & Tan, 2011). Information type and environmental augmentation have been found to jointly influence museum visitors' willingness to pay a higher price (He, Wu & Li, 2018). The second new research topic is the emergence of museum brands, accompanied by service management in the museum industry. Siu, Zhang, Dong and Kwan (2013) showed that both traditional relationship tactics and new service bonds affect customers' perceived relationship investment in a museum. In terms of assessing service quality for museums, the authors have also come up with a scale with 12 dimensions for measurements: assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles, empathy, communication, consumables, convenience, services-cape, purposiveness, contemplation, and first-hand experience (Siu et al., 2013).

2.2. Authenticity in heritage tourism

In a tourism context, perceived authenticity is an important aspect of tourists' evaluations of their subjective experiences (Belhassen, Caton & Stewart, 2008; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). The concept of authenticity has been expanded and interpreted in tourism and cultural studies: it

includes a wide spectrum of definitions that can be divided into object-based and activity-related definitions of authenticity (Bryce et al., 2015; Macleod, 2006; Wang, 1999). This categorization has also been called ‘cool’ and ‘hot’ authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). ‘Cool’ authenticity is assessed according to the origin or essence of the tourism objects’ source, and can be encapsulated as knowledge-based authenticity (Di Betta, 2014; Wang, 1999). ‘Hot’ authenticity is subjective (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). More specifically, in the context of heritage tourism, tourists experience three genres of authenticity: (1) closeness to the original ‘spirit’, (2) engagement with their true selves, and (3) an existential state of being activated by tourist activities (González, 2008).

Objective authenticity is conceptualized as an inherent property of a tourism object (MacCannell, 1973, 1999) that can be evaluated using an absolute standard. From a management perspective, it is not feasible to achieve absolutely objective authenticity in contemporary museum or tourism contexts. Furthermore, post-modern tourists have been characterized as affect-driven and experience-seeking hedonists. They generally judge authenticity through emotional experiences (Goulding, 2000; Jensen & Lindberg, 2001). Therefore, adopting a tourist perspective, the concept of authenticity has been reinterpreted as tourists’ psychological relatedness to the exhibited objects (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). This reconceptualization makes it possible to explain tourists’ experiences in the absence of authentic objects. Perceived objective authenticity highlights the cognitive dimension of the visitor experience (MacCannell, 1973, 1999). It stimulates tourists to visit and experience historical sites, attain knowledge about objects and cultures, and participate in heritage consumption (Chhabra, Healy & Sills, 2003; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

Many studies have emphasized the importance of embedding authenticity into visitors’ subjective experience. There are two approaches to understanding the existential authenticity contained in tourists’ heritage consumption. The first approach defines existential authenticity as a mental state of being true to one’s essential nature (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), which could be further understood in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity. The former refers to having a sense of one’s ‘true self’ (Berger, 1973; Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2017) and self-actualization (Yi, Lin, Jin & Luo, 2017), and the latter arises from keeping in touch with other people (e.g. local residents, traveling companions and others) in a natural, authentic, and friendly way (Fu, 2019).

As explicated by Wang (1999), to achieve self-transformation and self-exploration one must escape from daily routine. Travel and leisure activities offer a means of alleviating anxiety and finding happiness (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015) and act as catalysts for the achievement of the existential self (Brown, 2013). The experience of existential authenticity is sought as an antidote to the mundane nature of daily routines and the constraints of social norms. Shepherd (2015) further emphasized that authentic being can only be attained within a community that shares the same values and culture. These arguments resonated with González's (2008) identification of 'true selves' and an 'existential state of being' in heritage experiences. Previous studies have found that both tangible (e.g. architectural heritage) and intangible (e.g. traditional customs and folk culture) components of cultural heritage are antecedents to existential authenticity, and perceived existential authenticity is positively related to heritage destination loyalty (Yi, Fu, Yu & Jiang, 2018; Yi, Lin, Jin & Luo, 2016). Lin (2017) compared the effects of authenticity (of different types) on heritage tourists' willingness to pay, and concluded that intra-personal authenticity has had a greater impact on willingness-to-pay than object-related and inter-personal authenticity.

The second approach to understanding existential authenticity conceptualizes it as the spiritual experience generated from tourists' inner interactions with heritage offerings. This concept was described as 'closeness to the original spirit' by González (2008). According to the constructivist paradigm, existential authenticity is catalyzed by individuals' interactions with heritage objects and their intangible cultural connotations and belief (Chhabra et al., 2003; Naoi, 2004). Brown (2013) further proposed that existential authenticity in heritage experience is associated with visitors' interaction with a destination's attributes. According to this definition, perceptions of authenticity are formed through interactions with local buildings, residents, souvenirs, and other tangible heritage, as well as events, rituals, culture traditions, and other intangible clues. Existential authenticity is generated by individuals' in-depth immersion in the relevant heritage stories, a sense of connection with the local history, and thorough insights into visited sites (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Novello & Fernandez, 2016; Zhou et al., 2013). In this sense, existential authenticity parallels the concept of the romantic gaze (Urry, 1995), which emphasizes the authenticity inherent in personal relationships with the gazed-upon objects. In the museum context, authenticity is refracted through individuals' feelings, imagination, and empathy (Fyfe & Ross, 2015), and closely connected to visitors' appreciation, beliefs, and cognition (Chhetri,

Arrowsmith & Jackson, 2004). Perceived existential authenticity has been shown to positively influence tourists' destination loyalty and satisfaction (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Novello & Fernandez, 2016). Hence, it can create intimacy between visitors and both tangible objects and intangible culture at heritage attractions.

In addition, a number of components or dimensions of authenticity have been explored in conceptualizing or theorizing the term. For instance, in investigating Generation Y's perceptions of authenticity in heritage tourism, four components are outlined in relation to essentialist, negotiation, constructivist and existentialist authenticity (Chhabra, 2010). In the context of intangible cultural heritage, Wesener (2017) asserts that authenticity of a place includes such dimensions as origins, continuity and potentiality. The value-making of intangible cultural heritage hence has a bearing on 'subjective authenticity', which involves intrapersonal and interpersonal embodiments of the practitioners (Su, 2018). Moreover, contemporary re-creation and interventions of immersive digital technologies have changed the manner in which heritage is restored and presented to its audience, which produced a state of hyper-reality (Duval, Smith, Gauchon, Mayer & Malgat, 2020) or verisimilar authenticity (Martínez, 2019).

2.3. Authenticity in museum visits

Authenticity in museums was originally based on a museum-centric perception of the objects displayed in exhibits (Kim & Jamal, 2007; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Shepherd, 2015; Wang, 1999). Consequently, in early studies, authenticity in a museum setting was evaluated by values of exhibits (Trilling, 2009). This perspective intrinsically and exclusively emphasized the objective attributes of collected and displayed materials, and highlighted their unbiased and original statuses (MacCannell, 1973). Museums contain primary sources (including original documents and relics), where these 'real artifacts' help visitors shape the sense of authenticity (Deacon & Smeets, 2013). As observed by Leonard (2014), museum authenticity depends on the reliability of material evidence and the extent to which museum exhibition represents the past.

Not all tourists pursue or request for the absolute sense of objective reality, but rather the spiritual enjoyment created by toured objects (Goulding, 2000; Jensen & Lindberg, 2001). Meanwhile, in

conventional practice, heritage possessions and relics that are vulnerable to damage, are moved out of their original sites to museum space, and later restored and preserved. It implies that although objects in museum collections are ‘authentic’, they have lost some of their original meaning (Lowenthal, 2015). It thus makes objective guarantee of authenticity generally impractical in both the tourism industry and in museum operations (Zhou, Zhang & Edelheim, 2013). Objective authenticity may not totally encapsulate visitors’ experiential authenticity in a museum context.

The shift from heritage collections to the provision of visitor experiences, has transformed museums and helped re-appraise the issue of authenticity in a postmodern society. Notably, it has been observed that alongside the ‘real’ objects, photographic story-telling (Hannam & Ryan, 2019), stage performance (Leonard, 2014), interactive multimedia (Evrard & Krebs, 2018), information technologies (Pallud & Straub, 2007) and other interpretive materials/tools have not only enhanced visitors’ embodied understanding, but also helped create authentic visitation experiences. Such genres of authenticity could be categorized as staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) or constructive authenticity (Edensor, 2001; Lash & Urry, 1994). Kurin (2004a, 2004b) further suggested that museums should not treat displayed possessions as ‘frozen objects’, but rather intermediary agents, through which a close connection could be established between inherited heritage and surrounding communities. Accordingly, museum visitors’ perceived authenticity refers to the subjective experience catalyzed by individuals’ interactions with heritage objects as well as their intangible contents, such as embedded cultural connotations, historical fragments, belief and spirituality (Shen, Wu, Wall & Tong, 2019).

Another line of research in this area has to do with how a sense of authenticity is established by museum components and influences visitors’ behaviors. For instance, Zhang (2011) demonstrated that indigenous authenticity is collectively reflected by museum staff and the public, and through self-identity and different forms of cultural representation. Museum visitors’ authentic experience is thus provided by the combination of object displays, simulated environments, living craftsmanship showcases, and other (in)tangible forms (Fu et al., 2015). Furthermore, perceived authenticity was found to be positively associated with leisure benefits (Shen et al., 2019), the time

visitors spend at the museum (Brida & Tokarchuk, 2011), level of enjoyment, as well as visitors' use of technologies (Pallud & Straub, 2007).

3. Methods

Both inductive and deductive approaches were used in this study. Three heritage museums in the Yangtze River Delta region were selected as study sites: Kunqu Opera Museums in Suzhou (KOM), the Craftsmanship Museum Cluster in Hangzhou (CMC), and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum in Nanjing (ICH). All three sites are supported by creative stories, pedestrian streets, recreational areas, and other leisure facilities. They are also popular venues for residents and tourists seeking to understand local heritage and traditional culture.

In the first stage of the research, multiple data-collection methods were adopted, including direct observation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as recommended by Menjivar (1997) as an integrated approach to exploring a specific phenomenon. Yin (2009) has argued that such qualitative multi-method approaches can overcome the defects of a case study methodology, which may generate results that are too specific and contextual. In the second stage of the research, a questionnaire survey was used to quantitatively measure visitors' experiential authenticity. These data were analyzed using statistical procedures. The direct observation phase was conducted by the first author, who visited each museum two to five times. During each visit, the author experienced and observed the museums' operations in general. Participant observation requires investigators to be not only insiders, but also acquainted with the research skills necessary to eliminate personal subjectivity and bias (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Data were collected in two periods: from August to October 2012 and from September to December 2013. The participant observations consisted of observing visitors' interactions with museum exhibitions and accompanying texts, with craftspeople and their narratives, and with other on-site interpretative options. Open-ended questions related to the research aims were incorporated into conversations with museum visitors. During this phase of data collection, field notes were made by the researchers immediately after the observations and conversations.

In addition, data was also collected through formal semi-structured interviews undertaken in May 2017. The researchers approached museum visitors, introduced themselves and their research project, and requested their participation in the study's interviews. Twelve visitors were interviewed before information saturation was achieved. During the interviews, the participants were first engaged in open-ended discussions about their organic experience in the museum, and their own perspectives on how the configuration, management, and presentation of the museum's collections contributed to their visit. In the heritage tourism context, open-ended questions have been used as a reliable approach to soliciting participants' views on perceived authenticity (Lin, 2017).

In order to raise the issue of authenticity, the second set of interview questions were further asked on the different types of authenticity: Objective, constructive, and existential. Some of the questions were as follows: "What impressed you most during your visit?"; "Do you think museums' exhibits represent local history and cultural traditions (please elaborate on this)?"; "Do you think museums' exhibits present a true picture of traditional art and craftsmanship (please elaborate on this)?"; "Does this visit enhance your understanding of the meaning of the exhibited objects and staged performances?"; and "What can the museum management do in the future to better preserve, restore, and display local heritage?"

The interviews allowed in-depth probing of perceived authenticity underlying the respondents' subjective responses. All of the interviews were voice recorded with the interviewees' permission and later transcribed manually. Content analysis, specifically thematic analysis, was conducted on the interview transcripts to identify recurrent patterns (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Gupta & Levenburg, 2010). The coding is guided by conceptual understanding of authenticity to ensure the capturing of relevant and/or related expressions of experiential authenticity generated from the participants' responses after their museum visits.

The results of the analysis of the semi-structured interviews were used to develop a questionnaire that had 18 experiential authenticity attributes as key components. The respondents were asked to evaluate 24 statements about their museum visit on a five-point Likert scale (1 being very negative and 5 being very positive). Such a scale is often used in measuring perceived authenticity (Lu, Chi

& Liu, 2015; Novello & Fernandez, 2016; Zhou, Zhang & Edelheim, 2013), and is thus considered appropriate for museum visitors to easily recall and record their perceptions. Socio-demographic data on the participants were also collected. A convenience-sampling technique was adopted, and the survey questionnaires were distributed to museum visitors at the do-it-yourself or rest areas close to the exit of each museum. At the Kunqu Opera Museums, 200 questionnaires were distributed, and 166 were completed onsite. At the Craftsmanship Museum Cluster, 100 questionnaires were distributed and 75 completed questionnaires were returned. At the Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, 100 questionnaires were distributed and 68 completed questionnaires were returned. After eliminating the questionnaires with missing data, 267 responses were retained for further analysis. The profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. Some salient points about the respondents are as follows: (1) 34.4% of the respondents were aged 18–30; (2) 28.9% of the respondents were students; (3) 42.0 % of the respondents held at least an undergraduate degree; and (4) 24.3% earned a monthly income between RMB3001 and 5000 (or US\$437 and 728 respectively).

Insert Table 1 about here

4. Results and findings

The thematic analysis identified original authenticity, interactive authenticity, and emotional authenticity as the main types of museum visitors' experiential authenticity. Specifically, 'Original authenticity' (Table 2) refers to visitors' feelings about the historical and cultural origins of the displayed objects and performance. It is related to 'objective authenticity', as recognized by the participants. Physical artworks, original objects, and primary materials are important in constructing this type of experiential authenticity. Unlike Western museums, which are not focused on objects, museums in China still have large heritage collections (Fu et al., 2015). Original authenticity is also associated with the tourists' personal understanding of the community's history and culture and its heritage resources, their recognition that traditional craftsmanship is disappearing, and their cognitive images of place (especially its peculiarities).

Insert Table 2 about here

Interactive authenticity (Table 3) is derived from visitors' responses to staged authenticity, which is produced by modern technologies. Instead of representing actual heritage objects in their original state, contemporary museums are increasingly using up-to-date exhibition technologies to display heritage collections in an interactive way that enhances visitors' participation (Handler & Saxton, 1988; Yan, 2009). In this sense, a museum becomes a 'pseudo' site, as suggested by MacCannell (1973, 1999). From the constructivist view, this dimension of experiential authenticity is based on the negotiation between the tourism product suppliers' reinterpretation and the receivers' judgment, which are subsequently projected onto the objects. This emphasizes how multimedia technologies can arouse visitors' sensory engagement, spiritual immersion, and comprehension of the underlying messages and knowledge.

Insert Table 3 about here

Emotional authenticity (Table 4) is the affective aspect of experiential authenticity. Heritage collections are associated with community residents' childhood memories, and they evoke a reminiscent mood that contributes to an authentic experience. Museums provide settings that are distinct from visitors' everyday routine: this helps them to recollect their true selves and gain a sense of enjoyment. Additionally, on-site interactive activities facilitate visitors' embodied and spiritual involvement in the living processes of making traditional handicrafts. Such interactive experiences play an influential role in increasing visitors' appreciation of their heritage and their veneration for craftsmanship. To some extent, this dimension of experiential authenticity echoes the concept of existential authenticity generated from the personal interaction with exhibited objects and their intangible meanings (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). This refers to the visitors' perceptions, feelings, and emotions, which can lead to real intimacy with local heritage, heightened community attachment, and emotional bonds with local history.

Insert Table 4 about here

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3.0 software to measure the following three constructs: Original authenticity, interactive authenticity, and emotional

authenticity. Table 5 shows that the factor loadings of all of the constructs were statistically significant and above the threshold value of 0.7, indicating close relationships between the index variables and their corresponding constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To evaluate reliability, both Cronbach's alpha scores (α) and the composite reliability (CR) were calculated for each latent construct. The α scores of the constructs ranged from 0.91 to 0.94, and the CR scores ranged from 0.93 to 0.96, indicating appropriate reliability (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2009). The average variances extracted (AVEs) for each of the original authenticity (0.82), interactive authenticity (0.70), and emotional authenticity (0.73) constructs were higher than the 0.5 threshold (Hair et al., 2009), demonstrating convergent validity.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell and Larcker test and the severest Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). As summarized in Table 6, the shared variance between pairs of constructs was lower than the linked AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The HTMT ratio method was applied to further ascertain discriminant validity, as it has been suggested that it is a better method of assessing discriminant validity (Voorhees, Brady, Calantone & Ramirez, 2016). The HTMT criterion is calculated as the ratio of the average heterotrait-heteromethod correlations (correlations of indicators across constructs measuring different phenomena) relative to the average monotrait-heteromethod (correlation indicators within the same construct) (Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2015). As shown in Table 6, the HMTM criterion calculated in this study was lower than the critical threshold of 0.85 (Clark & Watson, 1995; Kline, 2011), indicating that discriminant validity was established.

Insert Table 6 about here

In order to test the relative importance of the three experiential authenticity constructs in the shaping of visitors' museum visit experiences, the 18 attributes were reorganized: their mean values were used to place them into the identified three factors. Repeated measures one-way ANOVA analysis, which is used to detect differences between multiple correlated group means, was used to explore the differences between the five newly built factor-based attributes. The tests

used in the repeated measures one-way ANOVA, for example Mauchly's test of sphericity ($p = 0.000$) and tests of within-subjects effects ($F = 11.287$, $p = 0.000$; $\eta_p^2 = 0.034$), both suggested considerable differences between the three experiential authenticity constructs. The partial eta squared value (0.034) indicated that this was a relatively small effect, even though it was significant.

Post-hoc analysis using pairwise comparisons was then conducted to identify the differences in strength between the constructs and museum visitors' experiential authenticity (Figure 1). The factors falling in the same dashed circle are considered to have the same strength level at the 95% probability level. Significant differences were observed. Emotional authenticity was the most dominant dimension in museum visitors' experiential authenticity. Original authenticity and emotional authenticity had the same strength. Interactive authenticity had as much influence as original authenticity, but was significantly less influential than emotional authenticity.

Insert Figure 1 about here

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Theoretical implications

Authenticity is an elusive concept within cultural tourism, particularly as it relates to museums and other heritage attractions (Cole, 2007; Lau, 2010; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). This study advances the previous understanding of experiential authenticity in heritage attractions, specifically in museum contexts. Three genres of perceived authenticity are identified in museum visits: original authenticity, interactive authenticity, and emotional authenticity. The results of the study suggest that experiential authenticity in museum consists of both objective and subjective elements. Based on participant observations and semi-structured interviews, this research represents a pioneering endeavor to elaborate on contextualized manifestations of authenticity in heritage museums. Drawing on questionnaire surveys, the analysis suggests that the three constructs are statistically distinct. This study thus departs from previous research in that it demonstrates the process of visitors' interactions with heritage museums' contemporary practice. Through museum visits, such

interactions are transformed, at varying levels, into the visitors' feeling of experiential authenticity. Notably, emotional authenticity is found to be the most important dimension of experiential authenticity, with significantly higher scores than interactive authenticity. Original authenticity falls between emotional authenticity and interactive authenticity, and is not perceived as significantly different from the other types of experiential authenticity. These results also reveal that the three categories of experiential authenticity are not isolated, but are positively correlated with each other.

Emotional authenticity provides visitors with a unique perspective on consuming heritage. It is the most influential component of experiential authenticity. Museums are often presented as non-mundane venues distinct from ordinary settings and free from conventional norms. They are thus considered as places of renewal, contributing to visitors' sense of identity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Rickly-Boyd (2013) suggests that places are authenticated through personal affects and sensuous relatedness as a result of visitors' emotional involvement with heritage consumption. The visitors indulge in nostalgia and demonstrate affective commitment to the host community and spiritual connectedness with local history and culture. In this sense, the operationalization of emotional authenticity is analogous to previous concepts that defined authenticity as a form of subjective perceptions and emotions, such as the uniqueness of the spiritual experience and psychological connectedness to local history and civilization (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Su, 2018; Zhou, Zhang, Zhang & Ma, 2015). Furthermore, aesthetic and spiritual enjoyment is found to be an underlying dimension of authenticity. This echoes previous studies in that Chinese visitors' authentic feelings when consuming heritage and art are prominently characterized by the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure (Wang, 2014). In contrast with the moralized concept of authenticity in Western contexts (Taylor, 1992), authenticity in this Chinese context is a sensuous awareness of harmony, pertaining to aesthetic feeling and spiritual pleasure (Wang, 2014). Accordingly, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions are identified as important sub-themes in emotional authenticity.

The dimension of original authenticity emphasizes the cognitive aspects of visitors' experiential authenticity. It refers to the extent to which visitors perceive what they encounter in a museum setting as genuine and inspiring. Many visitors regard museum visits as a means to augmenting knowledge, enhancing personal growth, and extending the understanding of regional history and

culture. To some extent, this dimension of experiential authenticity reflects museums' traditional functions of education and learning. In addition, on-site observations demonstrate that visitors are keen on deciphering the origins of heritage offerings in a museum. This observation echoes a previous proposition that the experience of origins is an important dimension of experiential authenticity of a heritage place (Wesener, 2017). The exhibited objects provide objective evidence of the local past. They are reliable clues, allowing the audience to explore their place of origin and acquire historical understanding of the place. This supports previous findings that the genuineness of physical artifacts is vital to the perceived authenticity of heritage sites (Waitt, 2000).

Interactive authenticity is identified as the least significant dimension. To produce an authentic visitor experience, museum operators use multiple strategies, such as performances of traditional craftsmanship and commercial products and souvenirs, to achieve the goals of education and recreation (Conn, 2011; Prentice, 2001), while blending heritage preservation with a tourist experience (Bec et al., 2019). These practices are now commonly accepted as a mode of cultural reproduction in contemporary society. This study finds that it facilitates visitors' immersive participation and sensory enjoyment. This genre of experiential authenticity is similar to the existing concept of constructive authenticity, which is established by authority, power, and other social forces. In a museum context, it is intimately associated with curators' application of technological interpretation. In a way, interactive authenticity that is derived from visitors' immersion in the re-configured space could be attributed to emergent authenticity (Cohen, 1988).

The combined findings of the on-site observations and interviews show that visitors' emotional consumption of heritage is simultaneously constructed by the visitors themselves, object manifestation, multimedia technology, and on-site performance. These findings not only echo previous ideas that authenticity is co-structured and co-created in multiple forms (Prentice, 2001), but also imply that the three genres of experiential authenticity are related to each other. As shown in Figure 2, interactive authenticity and original authenticity evoke visitors' emotional authenticity. This is in line with previous studies that have highlighted how object-based authenticity is an antecedent of subjectivity-based authenticity (Bryce et al., 2015; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Lin & Liu, 2018; Novello & Fernandez, 2016; Zhou et al., 2013). It also confirms that a museum experience is shaped by visitors' interactions with the environmental and spatial settings (Falk & Dierking,

1992). Subjective authenticity is constituted through visitors' interactions with heritage objects and their intangible meanings (Chhabra et al., 2003; Naoi, 2004). Original authenticity represents cognition in which visitors come to know and understand the preservation and inheritance of heritage objects. Interactive authenticity is evaluated in relation to on-site interpretation, and is based on the use of modern technology and commercialization, which aim to reshape the presentation of local heritage and enhance visitors experience. Emotional authenticity arise from tourists' insights into the exhibited heritage and the local community's affective connection to the host community. This is consistent with previous research that suggested that heritage operations purposefully formulate a sense of belonging by depicting memory (Zhang, Xiao, Morgan, & Ly, 2018). Thus, visitors' historical understanding and cultural consciousness relies mainly on the physical artifacts and the historical attractions' attributes (Novello & Fernandez, 2016; Waitt, 2000).

Insert Figure 2 about here

5.2. Practical implications

This study also has implications for heritage management in the contemporary era. Technological advances have made augmented reality, virtual reality, and other innovative technologies readily accessible. Studies have shown that they can produce unique experiences in many tourism settings (Goulding, 2000). However, practitioners need to appropriately balance modern technology with original physical artifacts and other heritage offerings. This study reveals that museum management can positively influence tourists' emotional authenticity via the genuineness of the objects exhibited and by encouraging positive interactions with digital heritage. Heritage objects must be exhibited in a way that inspires and enlightens visitors, and must be interpreted in an engaging and understandable manner. Tangible remains that are archived and displayed in museums are carriers of place memories, evidence of the local past, and are permeated with vernacular culture. They are the epitome of local heritage assets, which are intimately intertwined with community identity, historical continuity, and cultural cohesion. The reconstruction of culture heritage is not merely an act of material preservation and restoration: it also requires the

practitioners to embrace the revival of knowledge, spirit, and belief, and the creation of an affective nexus between cultural heritage and the residents of its community.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This undertaking is not free from limitations. First, the research could be contextually specific in that three case points in China were selected (i.e. KOM, CMC, and ICH). The results may not be applicable to other heritage tourism contexts, other types of museums or museums in other countries. Empirically, different types of museums in different geographical locations could be further studied to enhance the understanding of museum visitors' experiential authenticity. In this regard, benchmarks could also be developed through future research in various type of heritage attractions.

Second, this study has delved into the hybrid nature of museum visitors' experiential authenticity and revealed the relative importance of its underlying dimensions. Nonetheless, attentions could also be paid to the outcomes of experiential authenticity in future endeavors, as perceived authenticity was also found to be associated with museum visitors' behavior (Shen et al., 2019). As such, the relationships between/amongst the components of authenticity along with visitors' evaluations of their museum experience need further clarification.

Third, this study was conducted on Chinese museum visitors. The informants' ways (or habits) of thinking, as well as their cognitions and/or behavior could all be embedded in this socio-cultural context (Hofstede 1991). Cross-cultural comparisons could thus be another line of future research to elucidate the heterogeneity of heritage museum visitors and their experience of authenticity.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Profile of respondents (N=319)

Demographic characteristics	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	43.9
Female	56.1
<i>Age</i>	
18 and below	1.4
18–30	34.4
31–45	30.5
46–60	29.1
60 or above	4.6
<i>Occupation</i>	
Government staff	5.8
Professional	10.4
Executive/Manager	17.2
Company employee	25.6
Freelancer	3.3
Retired	3.6
Student	28.9
Worker	5.2
<i>Education level</i>	
Middle school and below	4.4
High school	8.5
College	25.4
Undergraduate	42.0
Graduate	19.7
<i>Annual income (RMB)</i>	
1500 and below	6.7
1501–3000	20.1
3001–5000	24.3
5001–7000	20.8
7001–10,000	17.0
10,001–15,000	6.1
15,001–20,000	3.0
20,001 or above	2.0

Table 2. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums: Original authenticity

Theme	Subthemes	Quotations
Original Authenticity	OA1. Objects and artworks in their original states.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Here the heritage collections are well preserved and exhibited. Although some of the artworks have been repaired and reconstructed for the purpose of conservation, they retain their original character. (ICH-12) • According to the introduction to this special exhibition, enormous effort went into collecting the original objects. Curators stayed many places for months seeking authentic objects. Even minority ethnic areas in the South of China were on their itinerary. (CMC-2)
	OA2. A complete image of local culture and tradition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a meaningful visit. The collections here extend my knowledge of Hangzhou; for example, the dainty embroidery, beautiful paper-cuts, and the oil-paper umbrellas display the characteristics of traditional skills. All of them demonstrate the essence of Hangzhou's culture and traditions. (CMC-3) • This exhibition is a good presentation of a complete view of Nanjing's historical and cultural resources. I was impressed by the architectural features and interior furnishing and design of the ancient buildings. (ICH-5)
	OA3. Deep insights into the historical evolution of the place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I carefully examined the physical objects and display panels. They accurately and chronologically reflect the development of the society. The old photographs provide objective evidence of historical events. (KMO-1)
	OA4. Current situations of craftsmanship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is difficult to find descendants to whom to pass on traditional skills, such as tapestry, bamboo weaving, and kingfisher blue crafts. The craftsmen suffered, and always told their children to abandon this kind of work. (ICH-1) • I did not realize that there are so many dying arts in Hangzhou until I visited here. The strongest response for me is anxiety about the inheritance of traditional craftsmanship. It is hard to convince people today to engage such tedious work. (CMC-4)
	OA5. Primary sources reflect the uniqueness of a place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum contains many original documents, musical instruments, and costumes, which present the evolution of Kunqu opera. I really enjoyed listening to the melodious tunes of Kunqu opera and consider it a symbol of local flavor. (KMO-2) • The procedures and rituals of the traditional marriage customs displayed in the museum reflect the characters/features of the ancients' lifestyle and portray a local version of the host city. (ICH-2)

(Notes: KOM = Kunqu Opera Museums; CMC = Craftsmanship Museum Cluster; ICH = Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.)

Table 3. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums: Interactive authenticity

Theme	Subthemes	Quotations
Interactive Authenticity	IA1. Atmosphere and ambience constructed by modern technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the entrance, I encountered many colorful umbrellas hanging around the hall and simulating rain created by a mixture of electro-optical technologies. I felt that I was walking down an ancient stone lane, feeling the rain, and enjoying the romantic atmosphere. (CMC-1)
	IA2. Simulated scenes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is surprising to find a hall simulating Fan Street in Hangzhou in the nineteenth century. Wooden houses, fan workshops, and stores are found on either side. The scene is a simulation of a nineteenth century stone street and gives me the feeling of actually being there. (CMC-6)
	IA3. On-site performance of traditional craftsmanship and art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The craftsmen demonstrated the key steps in making Zhang Xiao Quan scissors. Although the demonstration was not associated with the original craftsmanship and meaning, I still really enjoyed the participation and interaction with the craftsmen. (CMC-5) • The highlight of the visit is the performance every Sunday at 2 pm. Although usually carried out by young performers who may still need to practice voice or dance movements, the show gives a taste of the art at quite a low cost. The performers try hard to add their own interpretations to the show as well. I would recommend the show to anyone who is interested in Kun Opera. (KMO-3)
	IA4. Souvenir and commercial reproductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My family collaboratively participated in the on-site do-it-yourself activities and bought the crafts we made. These handicrafts are meaningful souvenirs of pleasant family memories. (CMC-7) •There are a few handicraft makers, who are rather well known in their fields across China. Some of the stuff that they make is quite nice and can be purchased. (ICH-3)
	IA5. Tour guides' interpretations and narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I joined an interpretive group tour at the museum. The expert guide introduced us to the origins and development of the displayed traditional handicrafts. He also told many related legends and folktales, which increased my knowledge and understanding of the background of these crafts. (ICH-6)
	IA6. Figure models & dioramas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Figure models and dioramas are used to depict the scenes of craftspeople in the past creating the artworks; for example, they shown the manual production of Zhang Xiao Quan scissors. (CMC-8)

(Notes: KOM = Kunqu Opera Museums; CMC = Craftsmanship Museum Cluster; ICH = Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.)

Table 4. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums: Emotional authenticity

Theme	Subthemes	Quotations
Emotional Authenticity	EA1. Immersion in the museum atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum offers a really big space. I could move around and choose what to see. The overall atmosphere is quite open and peaceful. Here, I could recollect a comfortable state of mind. (ICH-8) • It is a place isolated from noise and hubbub. It gives me a temporary space away from everyday pressure. The tranquil atmosphere here also helps to alleviate my mental fatigue. (KMO-5)
	EA2. Appreciation for the folk culture and traditional handicrafts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I really appreciate the traditional skill of making oil-paper umbrellas, which can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. The museum visit enhanced my understanding of the cultural connotations behind it. (CMC-9) • The museum's interpretations accurately depict the long history and underlying meaning of the exhibited objects. The collections represent Hangzhou's local culture, which I sincerely appreciate. (ICH-7)
	EA3. Nostalgia for the traditions and rituals of the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt connected to the exhibited objects; for example, the rabbit-shaped lantern was like the one my grandmother made for me when I was young. Visiting here really brings back my childhood memories. (ICH-9)
	EA4. Admiration for ancestral wisdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was moved by the ingenuity embedded within the displayed traditional handicrafts. They satisfy both practical and aesthetic demand. (CMC-8) • Visiting here is a perfect chance to explore the creativity and wisdom of ancient philosophies. (CMC-9)
	EA5. Aesthetic and spiritual enjoyment in museums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional boxwood carving is characterized by its exquisite craftsmanship and delicate texture. It was the most impressive part of my visit. Additionally, this exhibit was really a visual spectacle for me. (ICH-10) • I was dazzled by the exhibited objects. The silk museum was very interesting, surprisingly, and the adjoining shop had many beautiful items for sale. It is also a spiritual pleasure to visit these museums alone. (CMC-10)
	EA6. Connection with historical events, stories and legends.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During my visit, the related stories were so fascinating that I felt like I was part of them. For example, "The Peony Pavilion" depicts the love story of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. I was especially touched by their spirit of sacrificing for love. (KMO-4)
	EA7. Sense of belongingness and attachment to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The exhibitions of local traditions extended my understanding of the community. I had never imagined that there were so many artistic achievements in the area. (ICH-11) • The exhibited heritage is the local community's valuable resource. It provides an affective bond connecting community residents and Nanjing. I love it even more than before. (ICH-4)

(Notes: KOM = Kunqu Opera Museums; CMC = Craftsmanship Museum Cluster; ICH = Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.)

Table 5. Factorial structure of museum visitors' experiential authenticity

Constructs and index variables	Mean^a	Factor loading^b	t-value	AVE	Construct Reliability
<i>Original Authenticity</i>	3.93			0.82	CR = 0.96 Cronbach's α = 0.94
OA1	4.02	0.91	20.25		
OA2	3.82	0.88	18.95		
OA3	3.92		19.84		
OA4	3.91	0.90	22.93		
OA5	3.97	0.92	20.72		
<i>Interactive Authenticity</i>	3.80			0.70	CR = 0.93 Cronbach's α = 0.91
IA1	3.96	0.82	11.51		
IA2	3.72	0.82	11.97		
IA3	3.80	0.84	12.59		
IA4	3.75	0.83	13.31		
IA5	3.81	0.86	13.46		
IA6	3.77	0.83	12.20		
<i>Emotional Authenticity</i>	4.01			0.73	CR = 0.95 Cronbach's α = 0.94
EA1	3.94	0.86	9.87		
EA2	4.14	0.77	7.98		
EA3	3.97	0.90	10.97		
EA4	3.94	0.88	10.41		
EA5	4.15	0.87	9.68		
EA6	4.13	0.89	11.10		
EA7	3.77	0.81	6.43		

(Notes: ^a The mean values were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "great deal." The scores here indicate the mean values of each factor and item, measured on the 5-point Likert scale. ^b The standardized factor loadings were all significant at $p < 0.001$.)

Table 6. Discriminant validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion (above main diagonal) and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (below main diagonal)

	Original Authenticity	Interactive Authenticity	Emotional Authenticity
Original authenticity	0.91	0.75	0.58
Interactive authenticity	0.81	0.84	0.46
Emotional suthenticity	0.61	0.49	0.85

Note: Main diagonal in bold: square root of the AVE.

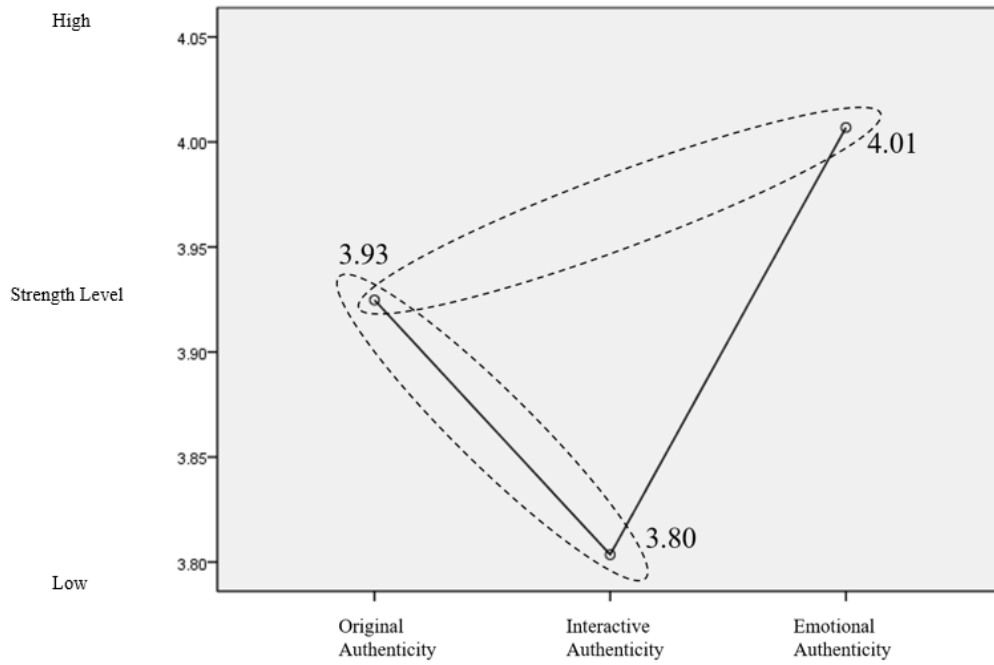


Figure 1. Construct strength: Original, interactive and emotional genres in experiential authenticity

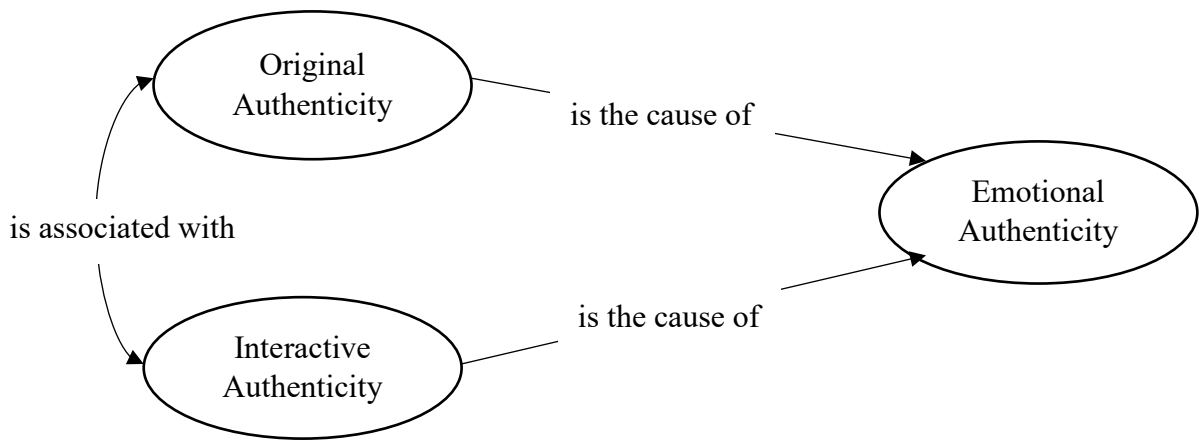


Figure 2. Construct relationships: Original, interactive and emotional genres in experiential authenticity