Artigos e ensaios

Authenticity in social media: a post-postmodern tourism perspective

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Abstract

In the digital age, the concept of authenticity in tourism has been fundamentally transformed by the pervasive influence of social media. This paper explores the evolving notion of authenticity through a post-postmodern lens. Its main goal is to highlight the importance of social media platforms in creating a post-postmodern perception of authenticity on travelers. The study highlights how Millennials prioritize "instagrammability" in their travel choices, seeking destinations that provide visually appealing and shareable content. Despite the rise of user-generated content and the democratization of information sharing, there is growing skepticism about the authenticity of social media images, which are often heavily edited. This theoretical essay adopts an exploratory and descriptive methodology, analyzing academic papers and non-academic sources to understand the interplay between social media and authenticity in tourism. The findings suggest that tourists are increasingly valuing experiences and locations popularized by social media, sometimes over historically authentic sites. This shift underscores the need for Destination Management Organizations and businesses to adapt their marketing strategies to resonate with the contemporary, digitally-influenced perceptions of authenticity. By examining the constructs of authenticity and social media, the paper contextualizes authenticity within current societal and technological trends, proposing the concept of 'alterreality' as a framework for understanding tourists' pursuit of fantasy in realistic settings. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on authenticity in tourism, emphasizing the significant impact of social media on shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences.

Keywords: Tourism; Authenticity; Social media; Tourism destination management.

Resumo

Autenticidade nas redes sociais: uma perspectiva do turismo pós-pós-moderno

Na era digital, o conceito de autenticidade no turismo foi transformado pela influência das mídias sociais. Este artigo explora a noção evolutiva de autenticidade através de uma lente pós-pós-moderna. Seu objetivo principal é destacar a importância das plataformas de mídias sociais na criação de uma percepção pós-pós-moderna de autenticidade nos viajantes. O estudo destaca como os *Millennials* priorizam a "instagramabilidade" em suas escolhas de viagem, buscando destinos que proporcionem conteúdo visualmente atraente e compartilhável. Apesar do aumento do conteúdo gerado por usuários e da democratização do compartilhamento de informações, há um crescente ceticismo

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sobre a autenticidade das imagens nas mídias sociais, usualmente editadas. Este ensaio teórico adota uma metodologia exploratória e descritiva, analisando artigos acadêmicos e fontes não acadêmicas para entender a interação entre mídias sociais e autenticidade. Os resultados sugerem que os turistas estão valorizando cada vez mais experiências e locais popularizados pelas mídias sociais, às vezes em detrimento de locais historicamente autênticos. Essa mudança destaca a necessidade de as Organizações de Gestão de Destinos e empresas adaptarem suas estratégias de marketing para ressoar com as percepções contemporâneas e digitalmente influenciadas de autenticidade. Ao examinar os constructos de autenticidade e mídias sociais, o artigo contextualiza a autenticidade dentro das tendências sociais e tecnológicas atuais, propondo o conceito de 'alterrealidade' como uma estrutura para entender a busca dos turistas por fantasia em cenários realistas. Este estudo contribui para o discurso contínuo sobre autenticidade no turismo, enfatizando o impacto das mídias sociais na formação das percepções e experiências dos turistas.
Palavras-chave: Turismo, autenticidade, redes sociais; gestão de destinos turísticos.

Resumen

Autenticidad en las redes sociales: una perspectiva del turismo post-postmoderno

En la era digital, el concepto de autenticidad en el turismo ha sido fundamentalmente transformado por la influencia de las redes sociales. Este artículo explora la noción evolutiva de autenticidad a través de una lente post-postmoderna. Su objetivo principal es destacar la importancia de las plataformas de redes sociales en la creación de una percepción post-postmoderna de autenticidad. El estudio destaca cómo los Millennials priorizan la "instagramabilidad" en sus elecciones de viaje, buscando destinos que proporcionen contenido visualmente atractivo y compartible. A pesar del aumento del contenido generado por los usuarios y la democratización del intercambio de información, existe un creciente escepticismo sobre la autenticidad de las imágenes en las redes sociales, usualmente editadas. Este ensayo teórico adopta una metodología exploratoria y descriptiva, analizando artículos académicos y fuentes no académicas para comprender la interacción entre las redes sociales y la autenticidad. Los resultados sugieren que los turistas están valorando cada vez más las experiencias y los lugares popularizados por las redes sociales, a veces por encima de los sitios históricamente auténticos. Este cambio subraya la necesidad de que las Organizaciones de Gestión de Destinos y las empresas adapten sus estrategias de marketing para resonar con las percepciones contemporáneas y digitalmente influenciadas de autenticidad. Al examinar los constructos de autenticidad y redes sociales, el artículo contextualiza la autenticidad dentro de las tendencias sociales y tecnológicas actuales, proponiendo el concepto de 'alterrealidad' como un marco para entender la búsqueda de los turistas por la fantasía en escenarios realistas.
Palabras clave: Turismo; Autenticidad; Redes sociales; Gestión de destinos turísticos.

Introduction

Rapid technological advancements have reshaped contemporary society, severely impacting cultural aspects. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are now integral to daily and tourism activities (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). Bauman (2007) noted that society has become deeply intertwined with a cyberlife, and this makes disconnecting from the internet increasingly difficult (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Krolow, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2013).

Social media platforms have become a key component of ICT, and they can enable more egalitarian communication, besides being able to facilitate sharing

and interacting on various levels (Durão *et al.*, 2017). Social media comprise a set of platforms that may foster online social capital by connecting, interacting, and building relationships among users (Jansson, 2018; Krolow, 2019).

For Millennials (born 1980-1994), creating highly engaging online content is a primary motivation for choosing tourist destinations. Schofields, a holiday home insurance company, found that 40% of United Kingdom travelers aged 18 to 33 prioritize 'instagrammability' when selecting vacation spots (Arnold, 2018). They may opt for destinations they have seen on social media to capture images they desire (Perinotto, 2013). Social media users often attend events or visit places specifically to record content for social media, attesting their presence at a location (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019).

Authenticity is considered an essential factor in tourism, exploring the dynamics of co-created value in experiences (Cohen, 1988; Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2018). However, the authenticity of images on social media has come into question, as they may not accurately reflect the genuine travel experience at a destination. Recent research has found that tourists are increasingly drawn to sets used for filming television shows or movies, valuing their authenticity over historically accurate sites (Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2018). This perspective, which applies to what is portrayed on screens, can also be relevant to content displayed on smaller screens, such as smartphones.

As social media perspectives reshape the tourism field, it is essential to revisit and adapt authenticity concepts to contemporary society (Thomas, White & Samuel, 2018), as the construct remains of interest to tourists seeking genuine experiences (Matos & Barbosa, 2018). Globalization has sparked a movement valuing local culture and authenticity in cultural, ethnic, and historical tourism (Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Wang, 1999). Recognizing what is considered authentic to social media users is crucial for businesses and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to tailor their marketing strategies, given social media's influence on tourism (Durão *et al.*, 2017).

The study's main goal is to highlight the importance of social media platforms in creating a post-postmodern perception of authenticity on travelers through a theoretical essay. This paper analyzes the different concepts authenticity has had over the last decades in the tourism research field. It also investigates how social media's influence on society has been growing.

The current paper proposes that a post-postmodern perspective based on the recent study of Canavan and McCamley (2021) is appropriate to investigate how authenticity in a tourism scope is perceived by most users of social media platforms. The authors contextualize authenticity as it was presented through the lenses of three modernities: modern, post-modern, and post-postmodern. They also state that an 'alterreality' would be ideal to classify tourists' search for fantasy in realistic settings through travels.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the novelty of the topic, the present research is exploratory and descriptive. It was based on papers published in renowned academic journals, which were identified through search engines such as Google Scholar, CAPES

journals, Scopus, and the Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library (SPELL). The expressions 'authenticity' (AND) 'tourism', 'social media' (AND) 'tourism', and, in Portuguese, 'autenticidade' (AND) 'turismo', and 'redes sociais' (AND) 'turismo' were selected to perform the search. The expressions were researched in both English and Portuguese in order to obtain a more relevant set of results, as the languages used by the majority of the researched authors is English and Portuguese.

Besides those papers, theses and dissertations were also sources of information, such as the works of Abdallah and Ayouche (2019), Krolow (2019), and Salazar (2017). All of them refer to social media and the influence of the Instagram platform to induce behavior away from the Internet. Studies which are deemed as classic sources for investigations about authenticity by several authors (Canavan & McCamley, 2021; Matos & Barbosa, 2018, Jansson, 2018, Köhler, 2021), as Cohen (1988), MacCannell (1973), Steiner and Reisinger (2006), and Wang (1999), were of substantial value in understanding the nuances and importance of the construct.

Furthermore, as it is a novel subject, especially when applied to the tourism field, non-academic sources, such as news articles, Instagram, and online polls, were considered significant to the research and incorporated. These were addressed for a better understanding of the daily use of social media platforms by tourists.

The mentioned search was conducted between the years 2021 and 2023. And the filters used, besides the mentioned expressions, were Journal rank, being classified with at least a B2 on the official Brazilian classification system or a Q2 value on the SJR international system, and the date of publication, with only articles and other documents published from the year 2017 to 2023.

Social media platforms

Social media platforms have become the most common source for travelers seeking information about destinations (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Jansson, 2018; Kim, Leht & Kandampully, 2019; Moretti *et al*., 2016; Palazzo *et al*., 2021). Decision making regarding traveling has experienced extreme changes, and Internet's influence over these changes has been widely demonstrated (Iglesias-Sánchez *et al*., 2020; Jansson, 2018; Smith, 2019). Over half the world's population was already connected to the web in 2019, with 4.13 billion people having access to the Internet (Clement, 2020).

The use of mobile devices used to navigate the web has been increasing since 2011, and as of 2014 it has begun outgrowing connections on desktop computers. Mobile connections were expected to be four times higher than computers' by 2021, and there were almost 6.4 billion subscriptions on smartphone mobile networks worldwide in 2023 (Taylor, 2023). At an online poll, 63,4% of surveyed individuals replied that they used a desktop or laptop to stay connected in the first quarter of 2023, but 95,3% preferred to access the Internet through their smartphones (Petrosyan, 2023).

Social media has thrived on the rise of mobile connections, with 79% of Americans active on social media platforms in 2019, profoundly affecting how society interacts and consumes information (Roser, Ritchie & Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

User-generated content fosters co-creation among users, turning consumption into a participatory process. Users create and share content without the need for professional expertise (Manovich, 2017). The era of individualized content and customization has emerged due to the abundance of creators and co-creators (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard 2020; Jansson, 2018).

Social media context has become extremely important to help understand the nuances of contemporary life because society and technology are weaved so closely together that it is not possible to understand one without the other (Jansson, 2018; Krolow, 2019). Therefore, a phygital world has emerged, in it the digital and the physical one have broadened until they reach each other (Ballina, Valdes & Del Valle, 2019; Due & Toft, 2021; Krolow, 2019). The new technologies of the 21st Century helped create a mixed reality where digital resources interact with physical actions, and Phygitality is an expression that conveys this new paradigm (Due & Toft, 2021).

This shift has transformed social media into a crucial element for understanding how communities live and consume, affecting how tourists choose their destinations (Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Jansson, 2018; Leung *et al.*, 2013). Travelers use social media to share real-time experiences, posting videos, pictures, and updates that provide personal perspectives on their trips (Arefieva; Egger; Yu, 2021). To testify tourists performed certain activities and visited specific places, they used to take photographs or buy postcards. But, as social media emerges, with its real time aspect, these images can be shared online to display the activities being done and locations being visited at the moment of the post, as if advertising "here I am right now!" (Lobo, 2023, p.5).

Over 20% of tourists in North America prefer to make decisions about their upcoming vacations after browsing their friends and relatives' feeds on social media (Liu, Wu & Li, 2019). These platforms, alongside search engines like Google, have been significantly impacting contemporary society's tourism system (Leung *et al.*, 2013). One of the most used ways to communicate in social media is through images, still or moving, and the way these visual cues are used in (and by) the platforms has changed how everyone experiences destinations and trips altogether (Palazzo *et al.*, 2021). These media have also gained a new role: helping DMOs, and even tourists, with updates in destination image, because pictures posted on social media can help create and change these perceptions (Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020).

Beyond seeking information and connecting with others, social media platforms are not neutral; they can change the rules of social interaction (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). These platforms are programmed to promote specific content, influencing user interactions (Biadeni & Castro, 2020; Krolow, 2019). The accumulation of likes, comments, and shares, collectively referred to as social capital, plays a role in content's virality and can influence real-life behavior (Shin & Xiang, 2019). For example, users who consume brand-related content are more susceptible to also purchase the brand's products (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). Some current must visit attractions, like streets, could be considered ordinary before, but social media posts portrayed them and made them go viral, demonstrating that this mimicry of behavior has reached the tourism field (Shin & Xiang, 2019).

Tourism can be considered as a peak experience by travelers (Mohammadi *et al.*, 2020; Tribe & Mkono, 2017), and it is consumed as it is produced. Because

of this, co-creation has been considered by researchers as an important aspect of the tourism experience (Durão *et al.*, 2017; Mohammadi *et al.*, 2020; Shin & Xiang, 2019). Social media platforms have transformed into strategic tools for tourism competitiveness, with travelers sharing their experiences and activities in real-time (Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Jansson, 2018; Leung *et al.*, 2013).

Social media induced tourism has emerged thanks to the increase in the use of social media platforms to search for destinations online, modifying them to advertising media (Shin & Xiang, 2019). Regardless, each of these platforms possesses different mechanisms and ways to carry a message. So, to thoroughly understand the reach of a content displayed on a Social Networking Service (SNS), it is necessary to perform an analysis within this SNS (Shin & Xiang, 2019). For the current research, Instagram was chosen to be the demonstration platform.

Tourism on Instagram

Instagram is, currently, the most powerful platform in the world, with users' engagement 15 times higher than that of Facebook's (Krolow, 2019). It is a preferred platform for users and brands, allowing users to showcase their sociability and reach their online communities (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019). Instagram's visual appeal serves as a self-expression gallery and a powerful advertising tool. It is a preferred platform for those seeking travel inspiration, significantly influencing travelers' planning processes and destination choices (Agam, 2017; Çelik, 2017; Krolow, 2019; Smith, 2019; Zucco *et al.*, 2018).

As a multimodal platform, Instagram enables users to post images, texts, and videos, making it one of the most used platforms globally. It rapidly gained millions of users within months of its launch, reaching 2 billion users in 2021 and 2.3 billion in 2023 (Salazar, 2017; Smith, 2019; Ruby, 2023).

Travelers have always been trying to reproduce the perceived image they have of destinations, attempting to register the experience in picture (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020). This has commodified landscapes, especially on Instagram, which turns them into tradable goods available at a marketplace (Smith, 2019). Tourist photography extends beyond merely capturing picturesque landscapes in photographs. It involves the art of crafting memories from experiences, crafting keepsakes of a journey, and providing tangible evidence of one's adventures to share with others (Yu & Egger, 2021). Sharing which have been primarily occurring through online platforms (Shin & Xiang, 2019).

Photographs play a dual role in shaping our perceptions of a destination. On one hand, they can establish and influence our expectations of a particular place, while on the other, they actively contribute to the overall image and perception of that destination in the eyes of tourists (Volo & Irimiás, 2020; Yu & Egger, 2021). Digital cameras have made it easier for travelers to share their images on Instagram. Younger tourists often rely on these shared experiences rather than official messages from DMOs and businesses (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Shin & Xiang, 2019).

However, there are debates about the authenticity of images on social media, with concerns about manipulative edits (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Jansson, 2018; Shin & Xiang, 2019).

Even though social media emerge as a significant resource for travel-related planning, the vast volume of information available through these platforms might inadvertently lead travelers to overlook the chance of stumbling upon fascinating, yet undiscovered, locations serendipitously (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). However, there are still adventurous tourists who actively seek out unique and off-the-beaten-track destinations. Jansson (2018) agrees with Campbell's (2005, as in Jansson, 2018) statement that destinations are now witnessing a phenomenon known as pastiche tourism, a form of bricolage, where tourists blend places they have seen in various forms of media with unexplored, non-mediated sites. Some travelers are actively seeking out places they have encountered in different media sources and sharing their experiences on their online profiles, highlighting previously undiscovered and captivating attractions.

However, there are debates about the authenticity of images on social media, with concerns about manipulative edits (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Jansson, 2018; Shin & Xiang, 2019). This editing may turn these pictures into unrecognizable locations, far from the original sites that can be found by tourists. As users have become increasingly wary of these images, they often question their authenticity, particularly in light of the extensive editing (Manovich, 2017). As a result, it becomes essential to investigate the ongoing debates among tourism scholars regarding the construct authenticity.

Authenticity

Authenticity can be defined as the quality of being genuine and real, denoting a trustworthy and irrefutable attribute, often associated with the traditional culture or origins of a particular people or place (Park, Choi & Lee, 2019; Wang, 1999). The quest for authenticity as a powerful motivator for travel appears to be widely acknowledged among scholars. What is evolving, however, is the recognition that what one considers authentic may not hold the same meaning for others (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Park, Choi & Lee, 2019; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Tribe & Mkono, 2017; Wang, 1999). The definition of authenticity has evolved from a straightforward, dictionary-like concept to a complex and dynamic subject of discussion over the years (Canavan & McCamley, 2021; Cohen, 1988; Köhler, 2021; Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2018; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999).

The pioneering author to explore the concept was Daniel J. Boorstin in 1961, even though he did not use the term itself (MacCannell, 1973; Matos & Barbosa, 2018). Boorstin's perspective highlighted that tourists seek experiences that allow them to escape from their everyday routines and roles. Their primary aim is not necessarily to find something truly authentic, but rather to fulfill their preconceived notions of what the host community represents (Wang, 1999). He referred to such experiences as 'pseudo-events' and declared that these were intentionally created to captivate tourists, providing them with relief from their ordinary lives.

Related to Boorstin's research, MacCannell (1973) was the first scholar to introduce a concept of authenticity to sociologic tourism studies (Wang, 1999). This author's perspective highlights that tourists demand authenticity, and they

seek experiences that go beyond the superficial, as their daily lives are often filled with shallow and inauthentic moments. The author notes that tourists may believe they are having an authentic experience, however this can be challenging to determine, as businesses and DMOs may stage areas to appear authentic.

MacCannell (1973) further elaborates that in the tourism industry there are two distinct areas: a front one designed for guests and visitors, and a back one, similar to a backstage area, for preparations, and where tourists are not allowed. Travelers often attempt to catch a glimpse of this hidden area, while hosts aim to keep it concealed. However, locals may stage a front area to resemble a backstage one in order to pique the curiosity of tourists. So, tourism can lead to the commoditization of cultural elements, resulting in the emergence of a staged authenticity within the industry (MacCannell, 1973).

The author portrays the search for authenticity as a journey towards discovering a piece of the world that remains untainted by modern society. This perspective lends authenticity an objective quality, a view shared by researchers such as curators and ethnographers. In contrast, Cohen's (1988) seminal work adopts a more social perspective on the concept of authenticity, characterizing it as a flexible and negotiable idea. This author recognizes that different tourists harbor varying expectations for their vacation experiences. Some tourists feel the urge to fully immerse themselves in the lives of the host community, while others remain detached and indifferent to what is original or authentic to that society. This demonstrates the subjective and evolving nature of authenticity in the context of tourism (Cohen, 1988).

Unlike MacCannell (1973), Cohen (1988) suggests that tourists are frequently motivated by the desire for enjoyment and the opportunity to temporarily escape from their everyday lives, rather than an exclusive quest for the authentic (Cohen, 1988; Köhler, 2021). Therefore, a crucial factor to consider is the traveler's personal emotional connection to their current trip. This emotional bond can be considered authentic by itself, regardless of whether the experience perfectly aligns with the host culture. This is because perceived authenticity plays a significant role in shaping tourist satisfaction, and, in many cases, it holds more weight than the actual authenticity of the experience itself (Park, Choi & Lee, 2019). In light of the fact that tourists typically arrive at a destination with certain preconceived expectations and notions, the concept of authenticity, as a social construct, can be viewed as the projection of these pre-existing expectations and stereotyped images onto the destination itself (Wang, 1999).

It is entirely plausible that certain products or rituals originally crafted for tourists in a manner that may not be considered authentic could, over time, acquire significance and eventually come to be considered authentic. This evolution in perception can occur as these elements become integrated into the cultural narrative and heritage of the destination (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). Indeed, all cultural practices have to start somewhere, and societies continuously reinvent these habits. Cohen (1988) describes this phenomenon as "emergent authenticity," where new elements or practices emerge and eventually come to be perceived as authentic. This process can even involve the commoditization of cultural goods, as these items become integrated into the evolving cultural identity of a place. Jameson (2006, as in Köhler, 2021), grounded on the emergent authenticity notion, states that tourist products can indeed be perceived as

authentic simply by their existence and relevance to the tourist experience, without necessarily requiring a direct comparison to the local culture.

The ideals of elitism and resistance to market-driven forces that typify the modern era can be linked to both objectivism and constructivism, although the constructivist viewpoint tends to have a more robust connection with these ideals (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Köhler, 2021). In the aftermath of World War II, a new world order began to emerge, accompanied by a shift in the economic landscape. This transformation significantly impacted cultural and social paradigms as late capitalism began to take shape. The ideals of late capitalism came to prominence during the 1970s (Köhler, 2021).

This transformation has introduced fresh perspectives to sociological studies, one of which is the concept of authenticity. Moreover, a new way of evaluating authenticity has emerged, considering the viewpoint of spectators. In this approach, authenticity is often perceived as dynamic and contextual (Park, Choi & Lee, 2019). When tourists feel that they can be their genuine selves, free from the constraints of their everyday lives, they are experiencing a form of authenticity known as existential authenticity. This concept relates to being true to one's inner self and true to their own individual identity (Tribe & Mkono, 2017; Wang, 1999).

During a tourist trip, travelers are liberated from the demands of their jobs and daily roles in society, allowing them to engage in more spontaneous and unrestrained behavior. Tourism serves as a vital activity for those seeking to reconnect with their humanity, as in the pursuit of tourist activities individuals are not obligated to conform to expectations or feel compelled to be authentic. Instead, they can simply exist in harmony with their true essence, if only for a brief and transient moment. (Köhler, 2021; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Wang (1999) and Steiner and Reisinger (2006) are major references in existential authenticity (Köhler, 2021). They state that the notion of existential authenticity, particularly in the context of tourism, is fundamentally a philosophical concept rooted in the nature of the activity being undertaken or the experience being pursued. While it is often associated with post-modernity, it finds its foundation in the works of influential philosophers like Martin Heidegger, who, in turn, drew inspiration from classical philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant (Köhler, 2021; Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). It involves an introspective journey in search of one's individuality, as it is believed that only through direct experiences can one attain a profound understanding of truth. As Steiner and Reisinger (2006) suggest, authentic tourists tend to resist seeking or accepting assistance and recommendations for their future vacations, including suggestions on attractions to visit or activities to engage in. However, this perspective may not translate into a social media context.

The concept of existential authenticity, though widely employed in tourism studies, has not been without its critics. Some researchers have argued that proponents of this idea have selectively drawn from Heidegger's work, and this has sparked a return to the notion proposed by Boorstin, suggesting that tourists often anticipate encountering something that can captivate and transport them away from their ordinary roles and routines (Köhler, 2021; Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Shepherd, 2015). Just as MacCannell (1973) highlighted that the staging of areas can hinder the pursuit of authenticity, the modern technologies integrated into social media platforms can also potentially obstruct tourists from experiencing

their genuine selves. These platforms are able to provoke anxiety and narcissism, diverting individuals from authentic experiences and interactions as they seek to project curated versions of themselves to their online audience (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). There may indeed be a growing need for a different kind of authenticity that aligns more closely with the historical and cultural context of tourists' experiences.

The demand for fresh ideas and concepts during post-modernity follows a marketing standpoint, which is rooted in North American culture. This perspective is characterized by the influence of market forces on standardized cultural productions. Some writers and critics have raised concerns about a cultural homogenization and the decline of creativity and originality, as they observe the market-driven approach potentially leading to a loss of cultural diversity and depth (Köhler, 2021). Thus, Kohler's (2021) perspective highlights a division among post-modern tourism researchers. On one hand, there are those who study the marketing aspects of authenticity, working on creating models and conducting empirical research. On the other hand, some researchers take a more theoretical approach, drawing from the ideas of thinkers like Humberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. They argue that the traditional notion of authenticity may no longer be relevant in the context of post-modern society, as it has been reshaped and redefined by the complexities of contemporary culture and consumerism.

Although the ideas of Eco and Baudrillard were published in the 1980s and early 1990s, they have continued to impact and influence various authors and researchers (Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Canavan & McCamley, 2020, 2021; Köhler, 2021; Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Wang, 1999). They state that the traditional notions of authenticity and fakeness become blurred. The authors suggest that what we encounter are various degrees of realistic representations of reality, some of which can be considered authentic in their own right.

Eco's deconstruction of the concept of authenticity revolves around the blurring of boundaries between what is genuinely authentic and what is a reproduction or simulation. He notes that in the post-modern context, representations and simulations can be perceived as more real or authentic than the actual object or location they represent. This phenomenon results in a hyperreality (Guerreiro & Marques, 2017; Köhler, 2021; Wang, 1999). Baudrillard's concept of *Simulacra* builds upon Plato's philosophical ideas, particularly Plato's classification of two types of reproductions: reliable reproductions that faithfully replicate reality, and simulated reproductions that are intentionally staged and distorted, thus being unauthentic (Köhler, 2021; Wang, 1999).

There are similarities between the concepts of reproduction and authenticity discussed by MacCannell (1973) and Baudrillard. MacCannell's (1973) notion that tourist spaces can be staged to appear more interesting corresponds to the idea that authenticity can be manipulated or constructed in tourism. Baudrillard, on the other hand, takes this a step further by suggesting that, in the post-modern society, *Simulacra* is everywhere. The absence of a clear point of reference for distinguishing authenticity from simulation or reproduction implies that there is no longer a definitive criterion for determining what is truly authentic (Guerreiro & Marques, 2017; Wang, 1999).

The Walt Disney World Resorts and Parks serve as an illustrative example of this phenomenon. They are situated in various parts of the world, and are based on the concept of fantasy and imagination rather than strict adherence

to traditional notions of authenticity (Guerreiro & Marques, 2017; Köhler, 2021; Wang, 1999). In many instances, it is not appropriate to label these experiences as fakes or inauthentic because there may not be a clear, original reference point to compare them to. Furthermore, in some cases, the simulation can even be considered superior to the original. For instance, the safari region at Disney World's Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Florida, provides visitors with the opportunity to see a variety of wild animals in close proximity without the need for long drives or extended waiting times, which can be a significant improvement upon the experience of an actual African safari tour. Eco's (1986, as in Köhler, 2021) comparison between Adventureland's wild river and a boat ride on the Mississippi River near New Orleans serves as another example of how simulations can provide unique and enjoyable experiences.

The post-modern perspective on authenticity has explored the evolving nature of authenticity and the increasing acceptance of simulated experiences by tourists (Köhler, 2021). Kohler (2021) highlights that post-modern society places significant emphasis on the spectacle. This perspective aligns with the findings in film tourism studies, where screen-shooting locations often hold significant importance for tourists. These locations can provide the hyperreality that many tourists seek (Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2018). Travelers have come to understand that most tourist attractions are staged in some way for their enjoyment. In contemporary tourism, there is often a preference for these intentionally designed and staged areas that align with the fantasized media images they have encountered, rather than seeking the kind of authenticity described by MacCannell (as in Jansson, 2018).

For a better understanding of the concepts brought by this research, a summary of them is made on Table 1.

Table 1 – Definitions of authenticity

Authenticity		
Type	**Features**	**Main author (s)**
Objective	A piece of the world untouched by modern society	MacCannell, 1973
	Staged authenticity	
	Front area and back area	
Social construction	Negotiable concept	Cohen, 1988
	Projection of expectations	
	Emergent authenticity	
Existential	Being true to oneself	Wang, 1999
	Experience oriented	
	Freedom from social roles	Steiner & Reisinger, 2006
	Search for individuality	
Hyperrealism	Representation of reality	Eco & Baudrillard (as in Wang, 1999; Matos & Barbosa, 2018; Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard, 2020; Canavan & McCamley, 2020, 2021; Köhler, 2021)
	Simulated experiences	
	Lack of originals	
	Simulacra	

Source: The authors (2023)

The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has indeed transformed various aspects of society. In some cases, there appears to be a shift towards prioritizing superficial appearances and aesthetics over genuine experiences (Köhler, 2021; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). While social media platforms are not solely responsible for the shift in the culture and philosophy of society, they have played a significant role in shaping and influencing social processes since their emergence (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The 'post-tourist' seemed to look for entertainment and recreation, enjoying simulacra. However, the digital tourists may prefer to stay connected and instigated (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). As it has been affected by many changes, in particular the ones brought by ICTs and social media, post-modernity is mutating into something more complex (Canavan & McCamley, 2020).

Post-postmodernity

Post-modernity has been seen as a decadent cultural perspective for some time, so much so that researchers have been trying to demonstrate the shift which occurred in the late 1990's or early 2000's in culture, society, and philosophy (Canavan & McCamley, 2020, 2021; Cantone, Cova & Testa, 2020). The September 11, 2001 (9-11) terrorist attacks in the United States of America have been considered the definite rupture for this period (Canavan & McCamley, 2021), and the authors have called the events an 'expulsion from Disneyland'. Social characteristics that have been arising since then are not features related to a post-modern epoch anymore (Cantone, Cova & Testa, 2020). Thus, society has been inserted into a new era, the post-postmodernity.

According to Cantone, Cova & Testa (2020), the three main characteristics of post-postmodernism are engagement, enthusiasm, and sincerity. Engagement is one of the main words related to social media, where the value of a content is co-created amongst its users (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Jansson, 2018; Krolow, 2019). Social media brought the possibility of sharing information during and after the trip; tourists became super connected travelers (Krolow, 2019; Liu, Wu & Li, 2019; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). 'Likes', comments, and shares are the main features to produce engagement in social media, and a photography that can be deemed as perfect to go viral on platforms such as Instagram is usually pursued by tourists, who also look for the perfect pose to demonstrate ownership of the image. The quest for 'likes' has been said to drive a tourist's itinerary toward famous attractions, or recent viral ones (Smith, 2018, 2019).

Enthusiasm is also present in the platforms, where most users try to portrait the best life possible, only highlighting their most memorable moments. Even though this may display an excitement about the user's personal life, studies show that these platforms serve as a self-representation board, where individuals tend to reveal only positive aspects of themselves, to seem superior (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019; Liu, Wu & Li, 2019). In fact, the reality portrayed on Instagram is almost never a good marker of the reality of the person who posted it (Abdallah & Ayouche, 2019).

Detecting what type of sincerity is present in social media posts, however, is the focus of the present study. The authors describe it as a main feature of

post-postmodernism, and that superficiality is over. Although this may be true through a marketing standpoint, it is not prevailing in the tourism research field, especially when related to social media. Canavan & McCamley (2021) state that narratives are now based on a selection of preferred realities, instead of the whole truth. Combined, these alternate realities create an authentic experience for the narrator, which can also be felt by the listener, or spectator. So, the post-postmodern movement selects pieces of truth and rearranges them into a larger, more selective narrative. This can be seen as manipulative. These fragments of truth are used to form parodies in post-modernity. For post-postmodernists, they are used to shape new constructions of reality, before selecting which of them may continue to be nurtured into a perceived reality (Canavan & McCamley, 2020, 2021).

For post-modernists, paradoxes urged the deconstruction of concepts, however, post-postmodernists have been showing reconstruction, despite the same paradoxes (Cantone, Cova & Testa, 2020). The post-modernists deconstruct facts and narratives to rearrange the pieces and produce parodies, while post-postmodernists shape new constructions on these fragments, before selecting which of them will be moving forward as a new narrative, as previously stated (Canavan & McCamley, 2020). The manipulation of realities deals with the dimming of limits between reality and fiction and fabulations are created. These fabulations may replace reality, turning it into an 'alterreality' (Canavan & McCamley, 2021).

Online communities show these paradoxes. They have been demonstrating to create a sense of tribalism despite the individuality with which its participants use them (Skandalis, Byrom & Banister, 2016). Audrezet, Kerviler and Moulard (2020) show that Social Media Influencers (SMI) performances on their own platforms can exemplify this type of behavior since their online messages are perceived as a more genuine type of communication than other kinds of advertisements. The authors also state that SMI's followers trust them and replicate their consumer behaviors, embracing products endorsed by Influencers. However, future studies are necessary to confirm if these SMI's endorsement occur through a genuine interest in the brand by the influencer, or if this happens only as a form of advertisement, which can generate a feeling of mistrust to their followers, and the brands' customers.

Final Remarks

The current research was conducted with the main goal of highlighting the importance of social media platforms in creating a post-postmodern perception of authenticity on travelers through a theoretical essay. In order to address such objective, an extensive bibliographic research took place, involving recent papers, theses, and non-academic sources, such as Instagram social media platform, and news articles.

The study has shown the importance social media has had to society as a whole, and its significance to tourism activities. The platforms have become ubiquitously present in society's daily life, being extremely difficult to be away. Besides, their capability of influencing real-life behavior based on online publications has been extremely valuable to DMOs and tourism businesses.

Moreover, even though there have been several definitions for authenticity in the tourism research field, they are not adequate to portray the zeitgeist of a social media-driven society. The post-postmodern concept of authenticity brought forth by Canavan and McCamley (2021) demonstrates that the division of reality into alternate ones means that, now, the favorite versions of reality can be chosen to be displayed. Such a concept is easily transferable to social media context, especially Instagram, where pictures can be analyzed before posted, to check if the angle is perfect, the lighting is favorable, and the editing filter selected is appropriate.

This way tourists can choose which reality they are showing their followers, and which locations were worthy to be on their online feed. So, a new type of tourist is starting to emerge, one who is no longer the ironic traveler in search of the *Simulacra* described by Baudrillard. Nevertheless, in trying to stay off-the-beaten-track, this visitor may cause destruction to what is unique, and this havoc may be reinforced by the rise and expansion of social media.

Technological growth may have disrupted the amount of time a zeitgeist lasts, with worldwide communities coming together online, globalization and new gadgets may bring forth changes in culture and society at a much faster pace. Nevertheless, more research is necessary to advance such a statement. Empirical research on what could be considered authentic for DMOs, businesses and tourists may consolidate a new definition for authenticity. Such definition could be confronted with previous ones to ascertain which would better portray contemporary society. The tourism quest for authenticity is never fully completed. The desire to search far and wide for more genuine experiences will always push humanity one step further.

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Contributions

Bruna Tavares de Almeida: Definition of the research problem and objectives; development of the theoretical proposition; realization of the bibliographic review and theoretical foundation; choice of methodological procedures; preparation of tables, graphs and figures; write the manuscript; adaptation of the manuscript to RTA rules.

Sérgio Rodrigues Leal: Definition of the research problem and objectives; development of the theoretical proposition; choice of methodological procedures; critical revision of the manuscript.