

**Cultural Experience Copycatting:  
An Ethnographic Approach of Compostela Copycats**

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**Keywords:** copycat; ethnography; experience; heritage; pilgrimage.

**ABSTRACT**

The study looks at the phenomenon of cultural experience copycats defined as experiences that feature a different name but are very similar in appearance to an existing cultural experience – explaining why they are so often confusing to consumers. The consumer experience within the cultural domain has been the subject of in-depth investigation during the two last decades (Bourgeon-Renault et al., 2006). It remains that literature on cultural experiences has yet to broach the specific issue of experience copycats. Despite being a growing problem for organizations providing cultural experiences whether this involves a heritage site, cultural event or religious pilgrimage (Bond, Packer and Ballantyne, 2015), it remains a largely under-researched field of study. For example, in China, lost Egyptian monuments are built again and still existing monuments are copied to provide cultural experiences to visitors (Sui, Zhao and Kong, 2017).

To investigate this new phenomenon, we build on the literature on products and brands copycatting (Van Horen, Pieters, 2012) that differentiates between copycat imitations of features and of themes. In theme imitation, the copycat imitates a leading brand's semantic meaning or inferred attribute(s). In feature imitation, the copycat and leading brand show commonalities, displaying similar or even identical features such as colors, objects' depiction, packaging shapes and/or the letters (font) or sounds associated with a brand name. Building on these insights, the aim of the present study is to offer a comprehensive understanding of copycatting of cultural experiences. It analyses consumers' sense of the cultural experience copycats in which they have participated. It focuses on the different meanings that consumers ascribe in original cultural experiences to feature vs. theme imitation, analysing to what extent this causes them to partake in copycat experiences. The goal here is not to test propositions but to undertake - using insights culled from existing copycatting studies that are potentially transposable - the fully-fledged exploration of a phenomenon that has yet to be studied in cultural experience copycatting.

Towards that end, we have chosen to look at copycatting of one of the world's most well-known heritage experiences - one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, namely the "Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage Route", which the remainder of the present study will refer to using the English translation of the common French abbreviation, "*le Chemin de Compostelle*" (the Compostela Way). Today, hundreds of thousands of travelers make their way every year to the city of Santiago de Compostela in Spain's northwestern Galicia province.

**15th International Conference on Arts and Cultural Management**  
**22-25 June 2019 – Venice - Italy**

The Compostela Way is a name that refers specifically to a particular cultural offer of marked trails mainly found in France and Spain. However, Compostela Way copycats have spread everywhere, despite not having the slightest connection to the original namesake. Since the 2000s, a number of leading examples have materialised in Canada's Québec province. The most well-known names today include "*Le Compostelle Québécois*" (the Québec Compostela); "*Le petit Compostelle*" (The Small Compostela); "*Le Compostelle des Appalaches*" (The Appalachian Compostela) and "*Le Mini Compostelle de Mégantic*" (The Megantic Mini-Compostela). All these copycats do not aspire to rival the original Compostela pilgrimage with a Canadian creation – just as done by the Festival de Lanaudière for classical music (Dantas, Colbert, 2016), nor try to differentiate from it; they just want to make people live a kind of Compostela experience in Québec.

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