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New Models of Cultural Tourism: Investigating Alternative Athens

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ABSTRACT

During the times of economic crisis some innovative forms of cultural tourism have progressively commenced to appear reflecting the creativity of young people trying to escape from the road of an economic dead end. This article is a case study that investigates the development of a small-scale creative business initiative at the city of Athens that promotes alternative products of cultural tourism in parallel to the traditional models during the stress of crisis. Mythology storytelling walks, creative workshops, educational games, street art sightseeing, LGBTQ tours and meals with the locals are some of the activities that this firm provides attempting to reassemble the notions of authenticity in contemporary Greek culture. The discussion is developed by integrating the viewpoints of the firm's owner/manager with tourism social theory reflecting that success is possible even in the times of economic crisis when innovative leadership is implemented.

keywords: cultural tourism, urban tourism, authenticity, innovation, creativity, Alternative Athens

Introduction

The financial crisis that spread to most of the sectors of Greek economy led to the collapse of the local market. The recession that followed affected also tourism, however not to such a great extent. Thus, after a temporary decline at the beginning of the crisis Greek tourism began to inspire again optimism and positivity, which was based on the modest increasing of the international arrivals (Lagos, 2017). According Lagos (Ibid) a promising tourism policy in Greece should focus on high international competitiveness through the qualitative reorganization of the tourist product.

Accordingly, one of the factors that influenced in a positive way the development of Greek tourism was a shift that has been taken place recently to special forms of tourism. This trend contributed to the upgrading of the country's traditional tourist destinations by diversifying the typical products offered with new specialized and qualitative ones. This shift is believed to bring a gradual alteration of the country's overall image from a classic summer vacation trip to a complex tourist destination that responds to modern competition (Tsartas, 2017, p. 70).

During the crisis some new-born firms appeared making great efforts to increase tourism demand by improving and diversifying the presentation of the Greek cultural heritage. There is a positive atmosphere that boosts new ideas and creativity, questioning the sterile retrograde tourism products of the 4s travel model, the routine museum visits and the persistent old-style projections of antiquity.

New media and the internet contribute further to the popularization of this progressive type of cultural adventures, so the broad-minded visitors can enjoy alternative perspectives of the Greek cultural heritage together with the everyday life of the local people (local, etc.).

Literature review

The consolidation of a unified social theory of tourism has been considered as a very difficult and complex task since many different social sciences must be infused for the spherical understanding of this phenomenon (Dann and Cohen, 1991; Holden, 2004). Boorstin (1964) presented an extensive critique of mass tourism that was dynamically evolving at the early nineteen sixties emphasizing its fake nature, while a few years later MacCannell (1973) developed his theory in terms of tourists search for authenticity. Examining tourism from another perspective Cohen (1972) presented a complex typology in relation to the emotional bonding of the tourists with the places they visit. In the same context Plog (1974, 2001) set as pointers on a straight line two basic psychographic opposing positions in relation to the nature of the tourists and the psychological factors that influence their choices of destination: the dependable (psychochetric) and the venturer (allocentric). Feifer (1985) from her point of view considered that we live in the post-tourist era, which is characterized by the people's fragmented willingness to move voluntarily between different types of tourist experiences and psychographic positions.

Most recent tourism research examines a multitude of incentives, procedures, experiences and environments, highlighting the diversity and flexibility that this phenomenon can have. However, according to Munt (1994), social perceptions of tourism, even in postmodern times, include the two major theoretical trends following Boorstin-MacCannell's original models. These trends, however, are developing in a creative, complementary and hybrid way and not in conflict (Uriely, 1997).

The first trend focuses on the analysis of hyper-real experiences, for example in "simulated" theme parks or other fantastic post-modern urban attractions (Baudrillard, 1983; Eco, 1986; Featherstone, 1991; Gottdiner, 1995; Lash and Urry, 1994) following Boorstin's concept of "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1964). The second trend follows the footsteps of the "other" postmodern tourism that underlines the quest for authentic. These studies are directed towards genuine urban and rural authentic attractiveness or the nature as real experiences (Barrett, 1989; Poon, 1989; Urry, 1990; Munt, 1994) following MacCannell's original argument of authenticity search. In retrospect Heitmann (2011) outlined and consolidated the different ideas on authenticity.

Further, Urry (1990) also developed the theory of "Tourist Gaze" based on the dominance of the visual dimension suggesting that the tourist experience includes particular "ways of seeing". Adler (1989) examined the reproduction and modification of distinctive travel styles and tourism in general as performed art, while Richards (2011, 2014) considered creativity as an important factor for the development of tourism in contemporary cities. Finally, some most recent studies indicated that the application of political philosophies to the tourism domain can contribute to various streams of tourism research (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Webster and Ivanov, 2016; Tolkach, 2017).

Methodology

This qualitative analysis highlights that despite the current problems of global financial crisis, development can still be achieved in some sectors of the economy and presents the applicability of certain theories concerning tourism in pragmatic terms. Thus, by using the existing literature and focusing in certain theoretical directions it presents their connection with practical reality. 'Alternative Athens', a small, local but successful tourism company was chosen as a typical example that can portray this phenomenon. By examining the conditions of this company's success that belongs to the sector of pioneering thematic cultural tourism, in times of crisis, it provides an understanding of how existing theoretical assumptions are valuable as they are consequent and can inspire innovators concerning the contemporary evolutions in tourism.

This study draws information from the company's web site and from an open interview with its founder. Interviews with firm owners and managers are the prime sources of information in the business world and they can have a great value because they present directly the reasoning of decision making in business administration. Only a few predetermined questions were presented to the owner/manager (O/M) of the company in the beginning of the interview, in order to set a framework for her narrative and keep the interview as open and adaptable as possible. These questions included queries about the history of the firm, the cultivation of the idea for setting up the project, the factors that played a catalytic role in shaping the idea and establishing the company, the opportunities and complications at the time of the crisis, the vision of the business, etc. My role was to maintain the focus on the thematic of the study in case of unexpected deviations. Eventually there was no sidestepping or pleonasm, so the interview took the form of a narrative.

During the analysis of the information in most of the cases it was required theoretical support to assess and interpret the managerial decisions. Thus, the analysis of the interview involved in developing and reflecting the meanings of the O/M in relation to the theory. Although meaning interpretation was based on theory, on the other hand generalizations concerning the specific managerial decisions were avoided as my plan was to make modest speculations about the applicability of the findings to situations under similar conditions and to present how innovators can perceive crisis as a challenge for novel development. Conclusively the plan of the study was to follow a deductive reasoning in which I set the subject's logic to the general tourism theory and not to supply general rules in tourism theory based upon the evidence given.

Alternative Athens

Alternative Athens was established as an individual enterprise in 2013, five years after the global financial crisis and today is a profit-making experimental travel company that employs twenty people. It designs and operates proprietary walking tours, experiences and creative activities in Athens and many other parts of Greece. From the beginnings, its principle aim was to show travelers the genuine side of Greece, away from the common tourist stereotypes.

The company has earned soon a worldwide recognition for its creative innovations on tourism services, featuring several times in articles of international mass media such as CNN, TV5, the Guardian, the Telegraph, Sunday Times, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, National Geographic and many others, that described it among other things as an innovative company that contributed "to change the face of Athens" (Alternative Athens, n.d).

The services offered by the company include walking tours concerning urban neighborhoods, mythology, archaeological museums, street art, historical storytelling, shopping, food, nightlife and LGBT nightclubs. Additionally, the company offers wine, tea and dessert pastry taste experiences at residents' favorite haunts, games and comics workouts, diner and cooking with locals and many other creative activities. It also provides exceptional day trips to Delphi, Mycenae, Nafplio, Sounion, Aegina isle, Hydra isle and further multi-day excursions and corporate travel and events.

The interview

I started my own business in 2013. I had no background on tourism studies; I studied economics in the University of Piraeus and got my MBA in England. After my studies I worked for some years to PR and marketing departments of several big companies. When the financial crisis broke out, I was working in the same sector for a French company until it was closed down in Greece. Anyway, I felt that all these companies could not help me express myself the way I wanted.

I always wanted to do something on my own. The first years of the crisis, the labor demand in marketing services in Greece, where I used to work, was in decline. Furthermore, it was much harder for a woman to find work in this area at this period.

I wanted to start my own job, finding something that I would really like and that had nothing to do with domestic consumption; I reckoned that the recession would be hard for the Greek people and the Greek market at least for the next ten years. Consequently, I thought that my income should come from abroad, therefore I should turn to tourism or exports.

Generally, over the years I have traveled extensively on long and faraway journeys. When I was travelling, I wanted to see how people live in all those places, that is, where did the locals go out, where did they eat, what did they do all day, etc. Even before the introduction of the Airbnb services I tried to stay at locals' guesthouses, however I was never into backpacking. My partner and I preferred to search for accommodation to certain type of tourism agencies that might had locals' guesthouses in their programs. At that time some small agencies abroad occasionally were providing accommodation in cooperation with the local societies in the margins of mass tourism.

Around 2012, I began to think about having my own company. I had never examined the way companies work on the subject that I was interested, and I never did any research. As I was unemployed, first I started to offer lodging with Airbnb service to earn some money; then I begin thinking what else could I do for my guests in order to expand their experiences. My opinion is that back in those days, when people visited a place using Airbnb service, they did not do it for mainly financial reasons; they wanted something new. They wanted to live in local neighborhoods, they wanted to get to know the locals and generally they wanted new tourism experiences.

At that period there was only one company that made some kind of a walking tour in Athens. So, I thought I would offer to tourists the things that I look for, when I travel abroad. I wanted to present Athens as I knew it, as I saw it with my own eyes. I knew many places concerning food, so I thought I would make first a food tour. Just like that, I designed the first food tour of Athens and I worked also as the tour guide myself, for my Airbnb guests. And so, since 2013 I started offering walking tours on my own for two or three people.

Apart from the main attractions and museums, Athens is a very intricate city. I believe that at first sight it can be hostile, with the traffic jam, the narrow streets, its poor urban planning, etc. You need someone to show you the places, to create activities for you and make your stay enjoyable and fun.

So, I thought I would show Athens as it really is, in contradiction to mass tourism, far from tourist stereotypes, presenting some absolute authentic sites. Beyond this, I had more ideas for walking tours concerning urban neighborhoods explorations, street art, shopping, fashion designers, etc. I started as sole proprietorship, where I did everything on my own, designing walking tours, guiding them and managing the business.

I never understood how the company grew up so quickly. I reckon, initially it was diffused by word of mouth. My companion and I did not have any money, we were both unemployed, we did not invest any capital in the beginning, we just built a website. We both had marketing background, so we knew how to communicate a product. We preferred the foreign mass media for presenting our project. There was a big response, people were really interested, I guess because Athens was in crisis and anyway this type of service was brand new at that time not just for Greece, generally it was something new for the tourism industry. We also entered the trip advisor.

Everything was done without a market research or business plan.

In the beginning we worked directly with customers. We did not address to agencies however some agencies later began to approach us. We made a mistake in the first place never

addressing to Greek media and Greek agencies. We did not deal with local media at all because we believed there was no need since our clients were abroad. That was a mistake because the Greek tourism agents and media could also make us famous and bring customers from abroad. So, we left the way for many other competing companies that followed us to promote themselves as pioneers to the Greek media.

Initially the project was considered hardly possible by our consulting accountants because we did not have the tourism office license. One way or the other, a legitimate way was found, and we went on without the tourism office license, though later we got one. Another big problem that we had to deal with in the beginning was the Greek legislation on tour guides which determines who can be a tourist guide on archaeological sites in Greece, because it is a closed profession. This means that guides need to go to a “National School for Tourist Guides” and get a guiding permission to work. In fact, licensed guides are not enough in Greece. That is why initially we stayed away from archaeological sites and museums and we were oriented towards food, shopping and street art tours.

The crisis prompted us, as we were unemployed it pushed us to do something, it gave us the opportunity to create new things; to create authentic things without copying. We are the first company to introduce many new walking tours in Athens and generally in Greece. We were the first company to make street art tours, the first to make nightlife tours and gay and lesbian nightlife walks, we made the first meals with the locals in their home, etc. But the most significant was our initiative on the mythology tour of Athens.

The company does not address to alternative travelers; we are not an alternative tourism company; we simply offer new tourism products, different from the typical products that have been offered in Greece for sixty years. Alternative tourism is a vast and fluid concept; for me personally, alternative tourism means something really extreme, like black tourism or traveling without any money, which is quite marginal or underground.

Our goal is never to make big groups; we have estimated that our groups must not include more than twelve people, but we can do many tours a day. Mythology walking tours did not exist on a systematic basis in Greece until 2015. They arose from the need for a change from all those boring presentations of the traditional archaeological tours.

Instead of presenting all these monuments through a clearly historical point of view, we see them through mythology; for example, which are the myths that are associated with the Acropolis, what lies behind them and what they reflect concerning the political reality of that time. We also have a mythology tours for families, experiential games in which myths are presented through games, etc. I do not think that our work belongs to the realm of “hyper-reality” tourism, though I think that we use the imagination a little more. I reckon that our work belongs to cultural tourism, something new that is always related to Greekness, to heritage and to the beauty of the place, and because our product is new, it is also “authentic”.

In urban walks we present to the tourists what the city really is, away from tourist stereotypes. In this manner we started to introduce as tourism sites some places and shops that were never visited by tourists. The criterion in our urban tours is to find areas that never have been visited by tourists in order to present a pure city view. In this sense, we have added slowly on the tourist map places that were never considered as touristic sites. So, what's “authentic” for us when designing our urban tours? “Authenticity” according our work lies on finding new aspects away from the tourist stereotypes. “Authenticity” is where there are no tourists.

Here however arises an issue. When our products are successful many tourists begin to enter these genuine unexplored urban areas. So other companies are getting on those areas too, thus after a while “authenticity” ends, and the product becomes mainstream. Surprisingly, I discovered that such forms of new tourism products have a lifecycle which is around three years. In the beginning the area remains natural and unexplored. Gradually the neighborhood starts to attract tourists and

reaches its top point becoming notorious. Finally, it becomes mainstream and if you want to continue doing tours in this area you have to enrich it with new themes and places.

Discussion

The O/M of the company develops her narrative concerning the growth of her business towards three main issues: the opportunities and the barriers that the economic crisis brought, her directions towards innovation and creativity concerning products and services of the new founded firm and finally her conception of authenticity in tourism.

The global financial crisis brought a great number of challenges and negative implications for regional and international tourism but surprisingly the storm was noticeably softer from the other sectors of international economy (Smeral, 2010; Papatheodorou et al. 2010). The recession that followed the economic crisis in Greece influenced also the Greek tourism industry, nevertheless to a smaller degree (Lagos, 2017). According Papatheodorou and Arvanitis (2014) the obvious losers of the economic crisis in Greece were those regions which had specialized predominantly in domestic tourism due to the severe austerity measures that had far reaching effects on the population in Greece. The worst years for the Greek tourism industry appeared to be 2009-2011, so when the O/M got involved in this sector around 2013 although employment rates were still going down, it appeared a modest increase of the inbound tourism (Lagos, 2017). According Eurostat while the unemployment rate in 2008 in Greece was 7.8%, in 2013 reached its highest point of the last twenty years at the level of 27.5% (Eurostat).

The O/M had experienced the cost of unemployment herself. She predicted that recession will last for a long time, and so she thought that her only way to success would be by turning to incoming tourism. As a matter of fact, inbound tourism was treated by many people at that time as a part of the potential panacea which could support the country to overcome the crisis (Papatheodorou and Arvanitis, 2014).

However, even before the crisis Greek tourism products were considered overmatured and supersaturated as the tourism industry was not creatively employing all the potentialities of the rich Greek heritage in comparison with other countries. Anyway, even today Greece is considered mainly as one of the typical destinations for middle and low budget tourists and belongs basically to the sun and sand mass tourism model. Thus, there is no doubt that in order to respond effectively to the growing international antagonism at times of crisis it is necessary to adopt persistent and reconstructive policies concerning all tourism products (Lagos, 2017; Tsartas, 2010).

Although, the size, the reputation and the longevity of tourism firms are typically considered by scholars as the central factors that obtain superior performance on the market, there is no clear consensus if those qualities are the only determinants of profitability. No one can deny that the new, innovative and small-sized firms just like Alternative Athens are unable to follow a substantial economic success (Agiomirgianakis, et al. 2013; Dwyer et. al. 2010).

Thus, in addition to the aforementioned factors, innovation and creativity can be also considered significant determinants of success. Generally, innovation in business studies is the research, the discovery, the development, the improvement, the adoption and the commercialization of new processes, new products, and new organizational structures and procedures (Shy, 1995, p. 221). Although innovation in tourism industry is not a common quest as in the secondary sector of the economy, after the millennium it became a great subject of academic discourse considering many issues including its conceptualization, its definition, measuring its parameters, etc. (Hjalager, 2002; Nordin, 2003; Volo, 2006; Moscardo, 2008; Katsoni and Stratigea, 2016). Therefore, in the same spirit, from the early beginning of her involvement in the tourism industry the O/M had realized the great significance concerning the concept of innovation in tourism products. In fact, it

was the challenge of innovation, diversity and creativity what pushed her to select this particular assignment, but her previous travel experience played a significant role also. It seems that since the beginning she had interrelated innovation, creativity and alternative ways of seeing.

The term alternative tourism is very liquid and after the millennium has come to include almost everything contrasting to the sun, sea and sand model of mass tourism, such as cultural tourism, small-scale tourism, green tourism, nature tourism, creative tourism, health tourism, sports tourism, festival tourism, religious tourism, pro-poor tourism, volunteer tourism, black tourism, integrated tourism, etc. (Tsartas, 2010; Benson, 2005; Derno, 1988; Holden, 1984).

However, alternative tourism can also signify a radical model that rejects the global financial economic system and generates together with the forces that promote autonomy and solidarity for all the people towards the betterment of the world. In this context alternative tourism can be a continuous search for instinctive harmony between humanity and nature (Tolkach, 2017); it can also be regarded as a lifetime *dérive*¹, away from the capitalist models of tourism spectacle (Debord, 1956). It would be interesting to mention here some alternative tourism networks such as “CouchSurfing” or “Squat the Planet” that work outside the mainstream commercial economic system (Molz, 2013; Squat The Planet, 2016).

Thus, the O/M considered that the term alternative tourism refers to something marginal or extreme, distant from the conventional meaning of tourism such as black tourism, hobo travel, drifting or those aforementioned libertarian approaches of tourism and she recognized that her work is detected much closer to ordinary commercial tourism, nevertheless as an innovative and different model of cultural tourism. She also opposes her work to hyper-reality although sometimes she builds her product in the sphere of the imagination with the contribution of myths. Theoretically her work can also be regarded as a form of creative tourism² (Richards and Raymond, 2000) that offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potentialities through active participation and learning experiences in connection to the contemporary Athenian culture.

Innovation, creativity and authenticity in tourism have much in common. Very often authenticity is related to the “other” postmodern tourism which is innovative and tied up with the 'quest for distinction from the mass' (Heitmann, 2011).

Many scholars investigated the concept of authenticity in Tourism Studies rendering varied interpretations concerning its essence. As I have already noted early on Boorstin (1964) and MacCannell (1973) considered the lack of authenticity that characterizes modern society as a significant point to support their theories, additionally MacCannell developed the concept of “Staged Authenticity” to present a process by which the tourism industry builds authenticities to attract tourists.

However, as Poststructuralists argued things are much more complex beneath the surface, since there are many contradictory readings and scenarios that make up a sign a text or a culture, therefore truth may be more elusive than we think (Smith and Riley, 2011, p. 120). In this sense authenticity is not a given and measurable quality nor a constructed and static concept that can be applied always in the same way; on the contrary it is negotiable according to the perception of each person. In addition, authenticity can change over time, so a cultural product that is currently

¹ *Dérive* constitutes one of the most significant psychogeographic techniques of the Situationists International exploring urban environments in a state of mind withdrawn from daily routine. During *dérive* participants must be driven by the perspectives of space and the attraction of encounters, without any particular destination, forgetting work, leisure or other conventional motives for movement and action. However contemporary mass tourism according Debord presents cities and landscapes not in order to satisfy authentic desires to live in such human or geographical milieus but on the contrary as rapid, superficial spectacles (Canjuers and Debord 1960, p. 390).

² Creative tourism has been defined as the co-creation of creative experiences with tourists, such as learning workshops, courses, tasting experiences shopping etc. (Richards 2011).

considered as non-authentic by a social group can be re-considered as authentic by the same group in the future (Cohen, 1988).

Cohen (Ibid) recognized the existence of an “Emergent Authenticity” as negotiable and evolving concept. Most recent studies have turned the quest by searching the responsible authority that determines authenticity and to the procedures that can define this liquid quality (Lugosi, 2016).

Cohen and Cohen (2012) suggested two modes of authentication that is the process by which a role, a product, a site, an object, an event, etc. is confirmed as original, genuine, real or trustworthy. Firstly, the “Cool Authentication” that constitutes a single, explicit, formal and official process usually provided and certificated by an established agent which tends to be static. Secondly, the “Hot Authentication” that is based on popular belief rather than official certification, arising through reiterative, informal and performative processes. The O/M moves along this later area of authentication. However, both of those two modes of authentication are interlinked and usually coexist during an evaluation. In this sense, apart from experimenting with meaning-making and innovative products Alternative Athens as a tourist agent can be considered that also establishes and certifies authentic places, by adding performatively unexplored spots on the touristic map of Athens.

The O/M soon understood that offering culture as an object of passive consumption is a dead end. In her work, she identifies to a great extent the value authenticity with the process of authentication, as a performative course of presenting something new, real and true in a creative way. She does not appraise authenticity as an inherent value of a destination. As Heitmann (2011) would argue, within the spirit of the postmodern era she removes the concept of authenticity from the object focusing on the meaning-making processes. The term authenticity for her refers to an unconventional, non-commercialized pure and most of all not staged approach of the world that is open to alternative views.

As Richards and Raymond (2000. p. 22) asserted, by developing creativity and alternative ways to present typical sights and places the human capital of cities can be utilized to develop new solutions to the problems of economic restructuring. Workshops, mythical storytelling, and games can also constitute innovative roots of authenticity. The O/M reveals authentic aspects of a typical destination to her customers in the way that she perceives them through her own eyes; she un-conceals the alternative perspectives of Athens that are parts of her imagination.

However, each root of authenticity is copied and performed by many other tourism firms and through the multiple repetition of this performance the real authentic quality loses its value and becomes a banal mainstream. No doubt, tourism has been regularly blamed for commodification of genuine sites and cultures that finally construct faked experiences in order to attract external consumers, destroying like this their authenticity (MacLeod, 2006). Commodification can generate to products and procedures concerning physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, etc. but it can also be implemented to the ways we see and experience the world. For O/M authentication, is a performative ongoing process of seeing things in a different way, it is another route that reveals the purity of distinct words, and it reflects after all the very essence of the destination’s authenticity.

Furthermore, apart the new modes of seeing that offers to the tourists, she has evaluated that the authenticity of the “backstages” (MacCannell, 1999) that she un-conceals has a lifecycle of three years. After this period the authentic becomes the victim of its own success as commodification transforms originality to typical mass tourism, that is inauthentic. Thus, as Heitmann (2011, p. 55) asserted “the very search destroys the authenticity – it becomes polluted and the tourist destroys what was aimed for”.

Conclusions

This study does not seek to produce systematic models that will lead to the construction of a grand social theory concerning tourism, it rather aims to examine a specific case, at a particular time and place, suggesting that success possibilities can arise even in times of crisis within the tourist industry.

It presents in a clear mode the connection between theory and practice and how innovative people can feel and predict possibilities of success proving empirically the theoretical propositions.

The routes of experimentation and creative effectuation concerning novel tourism models together with successful leadership can help small and new established firms to escape the trap of traditional tourism products that follow a downfall, introducing innovative authentic ways which may offer growth and prosperity.

The development of Alternative Athens proved that personnel's travelling experience, marketing background studies, intuitive management and creative involvement in specific time-place can generate schemes that reflect ideally the conceptions of tourism social theory.

The O/M of Alternative Athens realized from the beginning that innovation, creativity and authenticity associated with the rich Greek cultural heritage can set up successful tourism products.

Novel tourism models that offer creative experiences act as an effective alternative to traditional tourism, offering tourists different meanings and ways of seeing within a saturated market.

Authenticity for Alternative Athens is inherent in the action of authentication. The way this firm evidence authenticity seems to recall the myth of Sisyphus that was condemned to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill and whenever his task was almost done the rock rolled down and he had to do all the work once again from the beginning.

Thus, when the hard work of authentication is almost complete, the authentic tourism product is already transformed to mainstream and banal so the agent must propose novel meaning-making processes adding new perspectives of authenticity.

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