

Cultivating Relationship With Tourists: Role of Public Relations in Constructing and Promoting Authentic Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of public relations in communicating authentic experiences to cultivate long-term relationships with tourists. Focus group and interviews were conducted with 11 public relations practitioners of a cultural and eco-archaeological theme park in Mexico to understand their role and responsibilities in developing and promoting the park's image that fosters perceptions of an authentic tourism experience. Additionally, the study analyzed survey data collected from 545 tourists to evaluate their attitudes and opinions about the park's image and authenticity. Variations in perceived authenticity with demographics, visit characteristics, and information sources were also examined. Findings revealed that a destination's image is a significant predictor of its perceived authenticity, which in turn positively influences visitors' trust, satisfaction, and commitment with the destination.

In the global experience economy, authenticity has emerged as an important construct for organizations and the field of public relations (Debrecey, 2010; Henderson & Edwards, 2010; Molleda, 2010a, 2010b; Molleda & Jain, 2013a, 2013b). With the increasing commoditization of goods and services, experiences have become a key economic offering that organizations are actively designing and promoting in an attempt to look authentic (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). And as Molleda (2010a, 2010b) argued, public relations has a key role to perform in helping organizations create platforms that yield such authentic experiences.

As a consequence, authenticity has become a vital construct for the research and practice of public relations in the tourism sector (Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Molleda & Jain, 2013a; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). MacCannell (1973, 1976) argued that the primary motivation behind tourism visits is a quest for authentic experiences; tourists visit places that they believe have social, historic, and cultural importance. In a tourism setting, authenticity refers to tourists' personal evaluation of the extent to which their expectations from a destination hold true during a visit (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Public relations practitioners can help destinations convey the central ideas or experiences that tourists can expect at the destination to enhance its authenticity. And yet, authenticity remains an under-researched and under-developed construct in

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public relations scholarship, even when it has been extensively examined by other communication disciplines such as marketing and advertising. In general, the construct lacks theory building studies and empirical evidence in the context of public relations. As a consequence, authenticity is associated with multiple definitions, conceptualizations, and perspectives making it difficult for destinations, planners, and policymakers to integrate it in their tourism promotion programs and messages.

Therefore, this study examined the ways in which a destination can offer authentic experiences to its visitors strengthening their trust, satisfaction, and long-term commitment with the destination. The study developed a measurement scale for authenticity and evaluated the construct's linkages with a destination's image and its relationship with visitors. In this manner, this study advanced theory building in an emerging area in public relations. Examining the relationship among these constructs can reveal useful insights to destinations and their public relations practitioners. The study identified key attributes that destinations should promote in their public relations messages to enhance their perceived authenticity and ultimately, generate positive word-of-mouth.

The value of this study is also in providing empirical evidence of effectiveness of public relations in tourism promotion, an important area for both scholars and practitioners (Choi & Cai, 2012). This is among the first studies that empirically examined the tangible relational indicators of what public relations can achieve by their activities and the degree to which their efforts add value to the destinations they represent. The empirical examination was conducted by gathering qualitative and quantitative feedback from the public relations practitioners and visitors of a cultural and eco-archaeological theme park in Mexico. Measurement and evaluation are important issues in public relations (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Yang, 2007) and this study contributed to this research stream by operationalizing and quantifying the linkages among a destination's image, perceived authenticity, and its relationship with visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because of the limited public relations' body of knowledge about authenticity, this study examined the construct from a multidisciplinary perspective. The earliest discussions about the construct can be found in Greek philosophy where it is described using the proverb "to thine own self be true" (Harter, 2002), placing the self at the core of authenticity. In other words, authenticity is a quality of being true to oneself and one's core values (Henderson & Edwards, 2010; Molleda 2010a, 2010b; Molleda & Jain, 2013a). Molleda and Jain (2013a) defined the construct as the "degree to which stakeholders believe that an organization is acting in accordance to its identity, values, and mission" (p. 6). In this sense, authenticity is an experiential construct that is subjective and contextual, defined by publics' personal evaluation of an organization, its offerings, and its communication claims (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Camilleri, 2008a, 2008b; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Molleda & Jain, 2013a; Molleda & Roberts, 2008).

While authenticity is an important construct in tourism promotion (Knudsen & Waade,

2010; Molleda & Jain, 2013a; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011), the construct has been vaguely defined and operationalized. In tourism, authenticity was first examined by MacCannell (1973, 1976), who argued that achieving authentic experiences is a key driver of tourism motivation. However, tourists frequently use guided tours, which make such experiences somewhat superficial, something that MacCannell (1973) referred to as “staged authenticity” (p. 589). Cohen (1988) further argued that such staged authenticity is a product of “commoditization” (p. 372) of local life products and experiences that, prior to tourism penetration, were present in their real form. As these cultural products lose meaning to local people, they become overly exaggerated and fake in an effort to attract tourists and thereby “staged” to look authentic.

However, Wang (1999) argued that authentic tourism experiences are defined by individuals subjectively or inter-subjectively as the process of tourism unfolds. According to Wang, through other forms of tourism such as experiencing nature, going to the beach, partaking on adventures, enjoying family time, and visiting friends and relatives, tourists seek their own version of authentic experiences, irrespective of whether the toured objects are authentic.

Along these lines, Knudsen and Waade (2010) proposed authenticity is “neither a ‘thing’ you can possess nor a ‘state of mind’ but something people can do and a feeling which is experienced” (p. 1, italics in original). Through performative authenticity, as the authors called it, media, government, and other tourism promotion organizations can authenticate sites and destinations to enhance tourists’ understanding and intimacy with the places and surroundings they visit. In other words, destinations can communicate and offer authentic tourism experiences to visitors.

A few studies have examined tourists’ experiences to evaluate perceived authenticity of places and sites. For instance, Moscardo and Pearce (1986) examined the perceived authenticity of historic theme parks in Australia by asking visitors to evaluate the historic accuracy of park elements including activities and demonstrations, buildings, employees working in the park, and the overall setting. The authors concluded that authenticity is a subjective evaluation of theme parks held by visitors and an important factor in overall satisfaction with tourism experience.

In a similar attempt, Grayson and Martinec (2004) interviewed visitors at the Sherlock Holmes Museum and Shakespeare’s Birthplace in London. The authors proposed that there two sources of perceived authenticity: ‘indexicality’ and ‘iconicity’ (p. 44). While indexicality refers to the belief that an object was owned by a famous person such as Shakespeare, iconicity reflects the perceptions that an object is an authentic reproduction or recreation of the original such as a pen owned by Sherlock Holmes. In other words, while indexical authenticity suggests that tourists use an absolute, objective criterion to evaluate their tourism experiences (MacCannell, 1973), perceptions of iconic authenticity are contextually determined and formed in relation to what they expect their tourism experiences to be (Bruner, 1994; Cohen, 1988).

Likewise, in their examination of cultural and natural heritage sites in Mauritius,

Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011) found that items such as ‘have a documented history’, ‘verified by historians’, ‘represent the past’, ‘be a reproduction of the original’ and ‘represent a scenic landscape’ are the most important criteria for visitors. The findings led the authors to conclude that authenticity remains an important construct for tourists influencing their choice of travel destination.

Most recently, Molleda and Jain (2013a) evaluated the authenticity of a cultural event as evaluated by its participants revealing two primary dimensions of the construct: visitors’ overall experience in the festival and their active engagement with the values and beliefs that the festival promotes. The study concluded that perceived authenticity is a valuable construct that should become central in tourism promotion.

And yet, the construct is under-studied in strategic communication disciplines, most notably in public relations (Molleda & Jain, 2013a, 2013b). A limited theoretical understanding of what is meant by authenticity, how it can be achieved through public relations efforts, and what benefits it can bring to destinations is notable in contemporary public relations literature. Therefore, the study addressed an important gap in the scholarship by examining the influence of perceived authenticity on tourists’ relationship with a destination, and how these perceptions are shaped by the destination’s public relations efforts to construct and convey its image.

Destination image and perceived authenticity

Tourists visit places and sites with certain expectations of what they will experience in that setting (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Tourists’ expectations are often influenced by the narratives that a destination conveys about the core ideas and themes that define it and these narratives play a significant role in tourists’ travel decisions and behavior (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). A destination’s image can be seen as the interaction between the “symbolic representation of the organization’s personality or character that is portrayed to the public,” and “an individual’s personal understandings and interpretations of the things or objects he perceives” (Wan & Schell, 2007, p. 27).

In other words, while image is projected by a tourism destination by articulating and selectively promoting some of its key features and offerings, it is ultimately defined by the attributes that tourists associate with the destination (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Tourists’ opinions serve as an important benchmark to evaluate the authenticity of a destination and its communication claims. Scholars argued that perceived authenticity is the extent to which people feel that their direct experiences are consistent with their original impressions and beliefs that they held of an organization and its offerings (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Molleda & Jain, 2013b).

In addition to a destination’s projected image, tourists’ opinions are also shaped by several intrinsic and extrinsic factors. More specifically, tourists’ impressions of a destination are often based on first and secondhand experiences with the destination (Yang, Shin, & Lee, 2008). While firsthand experiences are obtained by visiting a destination, secondhand experiences are based on the information people obtain

through media and word-of-mouth. As Wang (1999) and Knudsen and Waade (2010) argued, tourists do not always visit destinations to experience its unique offerings. Often times, the purpose of the visit is to escape the mundane life-activities to seek excitement and adventure, or relax, or spend time with family and friends. In this sense, tourists are not authenticating a destination's promises but are rather creating their own authentic experiences by engaging with the destination. To verify these arguments, the study evaluated the following hypothesis: **H1**: A destination's image has a positive influence on its perceived authenticity.

Perceived authenticity and relational outcomes

Destinations, much like organizations, want to cultivate relationship with their publics to ensure long-term success. Relationships have been central to public relations research and practice ever since Ferguson (1984) first argued for a relational perspective in the field. Since then, several scholars have examined organization-publics relationships in various settings, (e.g., Bruning and Ledingham, 1999; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Jo, 2006; Huang, 1997, 2001; Kim, 2001).

Through these research endeavors, scholars have developed various indicators of relationships, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Hon and J. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001). Of these indicators, trust, commitment, and satisfaction are particularly relevant to this study. Trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon and J. Grunig, 1999, p. 19). Conceived as a multidimensional construct (Burgoon and Hale, 1984), trust is defined using three dimensions: integrity, "the belief that an organization is fair and just;" dependability, "the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do;" and competence, "the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do" (Hon and J. Grunig, 1999, p. 19). Similarly, commitment reflects the willingness of partners to exert efforts and resources to maintain a relationship that they perceive as important (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Finally, satisfaction refers to the perceptions that the benefits of a relationship outweigh the costs to maintain and nurture it (Ferguson, 1984; Hon and J. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001).

Scholars have argued that an authentic tourism experience is related to visitor satisfaction and long-term commitment to revisit a destination and/or recommend it to friends and family (Moscardo & Pearce, 1986; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). For instance, Moscardo and Pearce (1986) examined the factors that influence visitor satisfaction in a historic theme park by asking participants whether they will recommend the park to their friends and family. Additionally, the study examined overall visitor experience in the park using enjoyment ratings for park features, such as craftspeople, activities and demonstrations, shops and refreshments areas, cottages and other architecture, overall setting, and park employees. The authors concluded that perceived authenticity is the most effective predictor of visitor satisfaction and experience.

Similarly, Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011) found a significant positive relationship between perceived authenticity and long-term commitment of visitors measured using

items such as tourists' willingness to revisit, provide a good reference, and encourage family and friends to visit a destination. The authors concluded that examining the influence of perceived authenticity on tourists' behavioral intentions in an important endeavor, one that has been largely absent in contemporary literature. Since most tourism destinations heavily rely on positive word-of-mouth, it is important to examine indicators of future behavioral intentions of tourists. Therefore, this study examined the following hypotheses: A destination's perceived authenticity positively influences visitors' trust (**H2**), satisfaction (**H3**) and commitment (**H4**) with the destination.

Perceived authenticity, demographics, visit characteristics, and sources of information

Previous studies have reported that perceived authenticity is a subjective and contextual construct. For instance, Molleda and Jain (2013a) found that older and female visitors evaluated the perceived authenticity of the festival higher than younger and male visitors. Similarly, out of state visitors evaluated the overall authenticity of the festival higher than visitors from the state in which the festival was conducted. Validating these findings in the context of a tourism destination, the study also examined the following hypotheses: Perceived authenticity evaluations vary with age (**H5**), gender (**H6**) and national origin (**H7**) of tourists.

This study also evaluated whether perceived authenticity evaluations have any relationship with visit characteristics. Moscardo and Pearce (1986) found that time spent at a destination and the number of previous visits can significantly affect a tourist's perceptions about the destination's authenticity. Therefore, the following hypotheses were explored: Perceived authenticity evaluations have a positive relationship with the amount of time spent at a destination (**H8**) and number of previous visits (**H9**).

Finally, the role of information sources in a destination's perceived authenticity was examined using the following research question: (**RQ1**) What is the relationship between the type of source that tourists use to obtain information about a destination and its perceived authenticity?

METHODS

The study used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Focus group and interviews were conducted with public relations practitioners to understand their roles and responsibilities in developing and communicating a destination's image and authenticity. Additionally, face-to-face intercept survey with visitors were used to examine the proposed relationships among a destination's image, perceived authenticity, and its relationship with visitors.

Instead of a random sampling procedure, face-to-face intercepts were used because they are one of the most effective and appropriate method for evaluating visitors' perceptions and attitudes in travel and tourism setting (Kim, Borges, & Chon, 2006; McHone & Rungeling, 2000; Pearce & Schott, 2005). Litvin and Kar (2001) argued that

in the context of travel and tourism research, performance of intercept survey is better than any other type of data collection methods such as e-surveying in terms of response rate and sample construction. Similarly, Denstadli (2000) reported that intercept surveys are a preferred method of data collection in travel and tourism research where non-response is a major challenge.

Data collection site

Data was collected at a cultural and eco-archeological theme park, Xcaret (esh-care), located in Mexico. Tourism attractions such as theme parks contain the landscaping, buildings, attractions, and special events that are based on one or more specific or central ideas (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). These attractions provide the context and opportunities for interaction and experience on which tourists' perceptions of authenticity will be based (Moscardo & Pearce, 1986). Further, theme parks are different from most other tourism settings and experiences in that their purpose is to go beyond tourist or leisure setting to expose visitors to the preserved or restored aspects of a nation or region's heritage.

Located 35 miles south of Cancun, Xcaret describes itself as "a natural park that treasures the best of the traditions and culture of Mexico, a paradise that combines the natural beauty and cultural wealth of the country and the region" ("Experiencias Xcaret," n.d., n.p.). The attractions in the park include Mayan ruins and sites, butterfly pavilion, coral reef aquarium, and an underground river. Xcaret also offers its visitors performances representing Mexico's traditions with live music, cultural dances, and entertainment. One of the highlights of the park is a daily night show, "Mexico Espectacular," which features over 300 artists on stage that take visitors to a vibrant journey through the history of Mexican and Mayan culture.

Participants and setting

Focus group and in-depth interviews. The investigation started with a focus group with nine public relations practitioners of Xcaret followed by interviews with two senior managers on staff. The participants were recruited through personal contact based on a long-term professional relationship between the park's chief communication officer and the researcher. The purpose of keeping the conversation with junior staff members separate from the managers was to avoid the influence of supervisors on subordinates' opinions. The duration of focus group was 90-minutes and the interviews lasted 60-minutes.

Intercept survey. Subsequently, survey data was collected over a five-day period during which the park received about 10,000 tourists. With a 95 percent confidence level and two percent margin of error, the sample size required was 566 participants. A total of 570 surveys were collected by the researcher with the help of 10 customer relations staff members of Xcaret. The survey was conducted at the end of the day to evaluate the experiences of participants after a daylong engagement in the park.

Construction of the instruments

Focus group and in-depth interviews. The focus group and interviews with public relations staff were conducted in a semi-structured manner with follow-up questions asked by the researcher for clarification and explanation of a response. The conversation with participants started with an introduction of the researcher and the participants who described their current position in the organization, daily responsibilities, and the years of experience in the current position. The researcher then asked the participants to articulate the park's mission, values, and unique characteristics, how these attributes are promoted to external publics, and their role in this process. During the interviews, the managers were also asked to describe their relationship with the park's owners to understand the involvement and integration of public relations with the park's core business strategy, decisions, and actions.

Intercept survey. The survey instrument contained five sections. The first section asked participants to evaluate the perceived authenticity of the park on 10 items adapted from Molleda and Jain (2013a). The first six items evaluated whether or not participants' overall experience in the park was fun, satisfactory, memorable, comfortable, unique, and extraordinary (Table 1). The next four statements measured participants' overall engagement by asking them whether or not their visit to the park inspired them to value Mexican culture and traditions, contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions, advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions, and made them feel an active part of Mexican culture and traditions.

The second section evaluated the extent to which visitors noticed the expressions of Mexican culture and traditions during their visit to the park. Following Melewar and Jenkins' (2002) conceptualization, nine items in this section asked participants to evaluate whether Mexican culture and traditions were reflected in the park's colors, symbols, and other visual elements, marketing and advertising, buildings and architecture, employees actions and behavior, shows and activities, mission, food, music, and art and handicrafts (Table 2).

Finally in the third section, participants were asked to evaluate their relationship with the park post their visit. These statements were adapted from the instrument developed by Hon and J. Grunig (1999) and revised by Yang (2007) to measure the quality of organization-publics relationships. The original scale comprising of 14 statements was further revised and refined following a pretest (described in a later subsection).

Demographic and visit specific information was also collected at the end of the survey. The instrument collected responses on a five-point Likert scale. To accommodate the Spanish-speaking participants, some questionnaires were translated into Spanish by a bilingual translator. To ensure accuracy, the instrument was back-translated into English by another bilingual translator and after careful examination was found to be consistent in meaning.

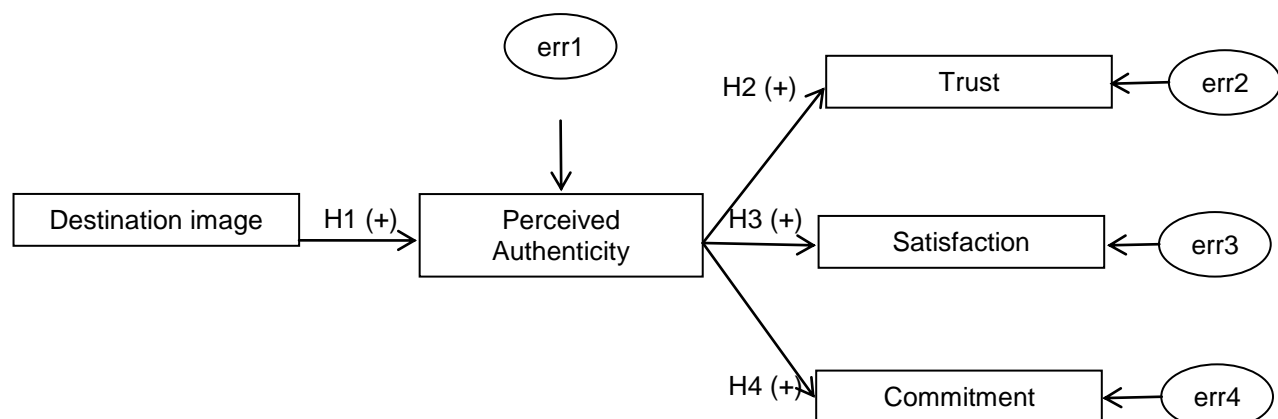
Pretest of the survey instrument

A month before the full-scale data collection began, a pretest of the survey instrument was conducted with 40 visitors of Xcaret. Using the feedback from public relations staff and the pretest, the measurement items on relational outcomes scale were refined to contain 11 items that also reflected visitors' intentions to seek information about the park, visit it again, and recommend it to family and friends (Table 3).

Data analysis

Survey data were entered in and analyzed with IBM® SPSS® Statistics 19 and IBM® SPSS® Amos 20.0.0 for Windows. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were computed. A Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with a Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization rotation was used to extract components of perceived organizational authenticity. The internal consistency of the scales was assessed using a Cronbach's alpha reliability test. To examine the relationship among variables, path analysis was carried out using Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Path model identifying linkages between a destination's image, perceived authenticity, and relational outcomes with visitors



Model fit indicators χ^2/df , CFI, and RMSEA were used to examine the goodness-of-fit of the proposed theoretical model. Further, correlation analysis with Spearman rho coefficients, t-tests, and multiple linear regressions were used to examine the variations in perceived authenticity with demographic, visit specific characteristics, and sources of information.

The data from focus groups and in-depth interviews was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify specific themes emerging from the responses. During the first phase of analysis, the researcher carefully read the transcripts and identified all possible coding categories in the responses. Subsequently, the coding categories were further refined to compile overarching themes supported by verbatim quotes as illustrations.

FINDINGS

Qualitative findings: Role of public relations practitioners

Sample description. Nine members of Xcaret's public relations staff including media executives, public relations coordinators, a graphic designer, a public relations chief, and a social media executive participated in the focus group. The participants' experience in their current position varied from six-months to 10 years. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the chief communication officer who had been working with Xcaret for 19 years and an art director who had eight years of experience in the current position. The thematic analysis revealed several insights regarding the park's image and the various ways in which public relations practitioners promote this image to ensure that the park delivers on its promises to the visitors. These themes are described below.

Xcaret's image. A destination's image is an outcome of carefully identifying, crafting, and promoting its key features and characteristics to external publics. To understand the core ideas and themes that Xcaret associates itself with and conveys to potential visitors, focus group participants and the interviewees were asked to describe Xcaret in their own words.

In general, Xcaret's public relations practitioners said that they saw the park as a true representation of Mexico; a cultural and natural habitat that manifests Mexico's values and traditions. According to a media executive, "people, who just visit Rivera Maya or Cancun, do not find a lot of culture. But, if you visit Xcaret, you can experience everything about Mexico." Participants also seemed to take pride in the fact that Xcaret demonstrated the beauty of Mexico breaking the negative stereotypes that the country is often associated with. A public relations coordinator said that "[Xcaret] is a place that demonstrates its love to Mexico where people can come and forget about violence, war, and drugs."

In addition to Mexican cultural heritage, Xcaret also provides an experience of the ancient Mayan civilization, which is incorporated in the park's archaeological sites, shows, and performances. A media executive explained that several visitors come to Xcaret looking for Mayan culture and get inspired to acquire more knowledge about it. Emphasizing this cultural association, another media executive contrasted Xcaret with Disney saying, "When you go to Disney, you go on rides and have fun, but in Xcaret you have fun and learn something about the Mexican and Mayan cultures."

Promoting Xcaret as an "experience." The term "experience" was used multiple times by all participants while describing Xcaret. A media executive said "in other parks you enjoy what you see while in Xcaret [you enjoy] what you feel." Therefore, public relations practitioners are constantly looking for possibilities for media and people to directly experience the park and its offerings. The staff is responsible for developing possibilities for media and guests to directly observe the park and get familiarized with its values, mission, and services (e.g. media tours, special events, festivals, etc.).

In this process, public relations practitioners described their role as facilitators who help guests experience Xcaret by sharing their personal stories, feelings, and emotions with guests. As a common theme, public relations practitioners emphasized that they all have personal memories associated with Xcaret that they often narrate to visitors. A participant summed it up when she said, “it is fairly obvious that we all have our own passions about here [Xcaret] and by talking to people who want to know about the park, you can transmit that passion.”

Public relations practitioners as storytellers. Participants often referred themselves as storytellers responsible for narrating the unique associations of Xcaret with Mexico and its people. The chief communication officer said, “[Xcaret] generates several stories every day. Most of practitioners will have to invent or create stories. We have so many [stories] that is hard to choose which ones to tell.” Similarly, the graphic designer said, “it is a challenge to show people what they will experience in the park and get them excited even before they see it [Xcaret].” The art director said that he deals with this challenge by simply communicating the various experiences that the park offers “never exceeding the expectations of what people will actually see.” Explaining with an example, he said:

When people see a Toucan on our brochure they want to come see a Toucan but it's not just the Toucan, it's the place, the sounds that you hear. So you come to expect the Toucan but when you are here it's the ambience, which is hundred times more than what you expected to see.

The participants often emphasized that they are extremely cautious about not over-promoting or over-promising the public anything that the park cannot deliver. The chief communication officer said that the aim of all communication is to “show more than what they [public] want, less of what they will get, knowing that they will be satisfied.”

Integrating public relations with core business. A key to public relations' success is its integration to the overall business strategy of Xcaret. The chief communication officer works closely with the owners of the park, particularly on matters that involve communication with external publics, such as the media. The interviewee described her relationship with the president as that of a peer who counsels and consults him on organizational issues, opportunities, and challenges.

Personal involvement and identification. During the conversation it became evident that Xcaret's public relations staff felt personal involvement and identification with the park and its philosophy. Without any prompt, several members said that they loved their job. For instance, a participant who has been working with the park for over five years said that Xcaret represents “a lifestyle because even when you know you have to come to work every day, you always learn something that you take home with you and use.” To this a media executive added, “it's an experience that Xcaret can give you as an employee and teach you a lot.” Similarly, a public relations coordinator said, “It is my second home. I am very proud of my job because I know when my family or people I

know are going to visit Xcaret they are going to be proud of Mexico and they will forget all the violence and narcotraffic.” Overall, members expressed that their association with Xcaret is a source of pride and satisfaction to them. This personal identification and involvement of members with Xcaret manifests itself in their daily activities and interaction with publics.

Quantitative Findings: Authenticity, Image, and Relational Outcomes

Survey sample description. Of the 570 surveys, 25 were discarded due to incomplete data. The participants’ age varied from 12 to 85 years with an average age of about 38 years ($SD = 14.6$). Over half of the survey participants identified themselves as females ($n = 301, 55\%$) and about 60 percent as international visitors ($n = 325$). The average amount of time that participants spent in the park was about nine hours ($SD = 2.4$) with a minimum indicated as one and maximum 12 hours. Most participants were first time visitors ($n = 383, 70.3\%$). Word-of-mouth was reported as the most frequently used source of information about the park ($n = 340, 62.4\%$), followed by the park’s brochure, flier, or other promotional materials ($n = 140, 25.7$), news media ($n = 127, 23.3\%$), and the park’s website ($n = 121, 22.2\%$).

Tourists’ evaluation of Xcaret’s authenticity and image. The perceived authenticity scale with 10 items obtained Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91. The dimensions of the construct were explored using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with a Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization rotation. Because the two factors obtained a -0.6 correlation, the choice of direct oblimin over the varimax rotation was justified (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). As Table 1 shows, the first factor of the two-factor model represented 57 percent of the variance in the latent variable, perceived authenticity, and the second factor explained 15 percent. All the items in the two factors obtained a factor loading of greater than or equal to 0.6 and therefore were considered meaningful (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). Similar to Molleda and Jain’s (2013a) study, the first factor was named *overall experience* and the second factor *active engagement*.

Table 1. Dimensions of perceived authenticity: Factor loadings, eigenvalues, and percentages of variance explained using Principal Axis Factor analysis

Items	Factors		M	SD
	Overall Experience	Active Engagement		
My visit has been fun	0.678		4.48	0.72
My visit has been satisfactory	0.735		4.51	0.69
My visit has been memorable	0.812		4.56	0.72
My visit has been comfortable	0.673		4.25	0.91
My visit has been unique	0.773		4.47	0.77
My visit has been extraordinary	0.897		4.41	0.84
My visit has inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more		-0.827	4.45	0.76
My visit has inspired me to contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions		-0.963	4.46	0.76
My visit has inspired me to advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions		-0.909	4.50	0.74

During my visit, I felt active part of Mexican culture and traditions		-0.600	4.21	0.95
% of variance explained				
Eigenvalues	56.74	15.00		
	5.7	1.5		

Notes. ^a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

The scale evaluating the park's image comprised of nine (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) items. As Table 2 shows, the item employees' actions and behavior ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.73$) obtained the highest evaluation in terms of its perceived association to Mexican culture and traditions and Xcaret's marketing and advertising, ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.0$) and mission ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.12$) obtained the lowest.

Tourists' trust, satisfaction, and commitment with Xcaret. The composite scale of relational outcomes comprised of three-items to measure *trust*, five-items to measure *satisfaction*, and three-items to measure *commitment* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$). Instead of using a sum or average of the items to make composites for each of the three variables, Principal Axis Factoring with Direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization was used (Table 3).

Table 2. Means and standard deviation of items evaluating image

Items	M	SD
Mexican culture and traditions are reflected in Xcaret's		
Colors, symbols, and other visual elements	4.51	0.660
Marketing and advertising	4.17	1.018
Buildings and architecture	4.46	0.774
Employees actions and behavior	4.53	0.729
Shows and activities	4.39	0.923
Mission	4.16	1.126
Food	4.29	0.979
Music	4.34	0.965
Art and handicrafts	4.50	0.775

Table 3. Dimensions of relational outcomes: Factor loadings, eigenvalues, and percentages of variance explained using Principal Axis Factor analysis

Items	Factors			M	SD
	Satisfaction	Trust	Commitment		
I am happy with Xcaret	0.902			4.56	0.69
I am pleased with Xcaret	0.875			4.55	0.69
I enjoyed myself at Xcaret	0.981			4.60	0.65
I liked Xcaret	0.945			4.63	0.64
I will recommend Xcaret to family and friends	0.610			4.69	0.68
Treats visitors well		0.896		4.63	0.62
Concerned with visitors' interests		0.867		4.60	0.66
Capable of delivering on promises					
Like to learn more about Xcaret		0.712		4.62	0.65
Like to receive regular information from Xcaret			0.848	4.24	1.00
Like to visit Xcaret again			0.794	3.85	1.32
			0.511	4.46	0.94
% of variance explained	59.80	13.15	8.55		
Eigenvalues	6.6	1.4	0.94		

Notes. ^a. Rotation converged in 12 iterations.

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Direct Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

The first factor (satisfaction) represented about 60 percent of the variance in relational outcomes, the second factor (trust) attributed for 13 percent, and the third factor (commitment) explained nine percent of the variance (Table 3). While the third factor obtained an eigenvalue of 0.9, it was retained because of its theoretical conceptualization in this study. The item, I will recommend Xcaret to family and friends received the highest score ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.68$) and the item, I would like to receive regular information from Xcaret received the lowest score ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.32$).

Relationship among constructs. To examine the relationships among constructs, path analysis using Maximum Likelihood estimation was conducted. The model fit indicators showed that the proposed model has a good fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.561$, $p = 0.196$, CFI = 0.999 and RMSEA = 0.032 [0.000, 0.085]. Results of path analysis supported H1 that proposed that a destination's image has a positive influence on its perceived authenticity. As Table 4 shows, the standardized direct effect of Xcaret's image on its perceived authenticity was found to be positive and significant (*standardized coefficient* = 0.28, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Maximum Likelihood Estimates of structural paths

	Standardized estimate	Unstandardized estimate	Standard error	p-value
Image → Perceived authenticity	0.283	0.311	0.032	<0.001
Perceived authenticity → Trust	0.938	0.261	0.016	<0.001
Perceived authenticity → Satisfaction	0.878	0.408	0.026	<0.001
Perceived authenticity → Commitment	0.815	0.447	0.025	<0.001

Likewise, the path analysis also confirmed H2, H3, and H4 proposed in this study (Table 4). Xcaret's perceived authenticity was found to have a positive and significant standardized direct effect on visitors' trust (*standardized coefficient* = 0.94, $p < 0.05$), satisfaction (*standardized coefficient* = 0.88, $p < 0.001$), and relational commitment (*standardized coefficient* = 0.82, $p < 0.001$) with the park.

Perceived Authenticity and Visitor Demographics

Using three hypotheses, this study examined the variation in perceived authenticity with age (H5), gender (H6), and country-of-origin (H7). The Spearman rho correlations between age and the two perceived authenticity dimensions (i.e. overall experience and active engagement) were not found to be significant. Similarly, no significant differences were found between male and female participants' evaluations of overall experience and active engagement dimensions of perceived authenticity. Therefore, H5 and H6 were not supported.

In terms of national origin, results of independent sample t-tests showed that Mexican tourists evaluated the active engagement dimension of perceived authenticity higher than the international tourists ($t(541) = 3.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.3$, medium effect). This dimension consists of items that reflect the degree to which participants were inspired to value, contribute, and advocate for the conservation of Mexican culture and traditions and their level of active involvement with Mexican culture and traditions during their visit to the park. To further explore this finding, the two groups of tourists were compared along each of the 10-items on the perceived authenticity scale.

For each item, the means of Mexican tourists were found to be higher than the means for international tourists (Table 5).

Table 5. Means of Mexican and international visitors' evaluation of perceived authenticity items

Items	Mexican visitors (n=219)		International visitors (n=324)	
	M	SD	M	SD
My visit has been fun	4.56	0.64	4.43	0.77
My visit has been satisfactory	4.58	0.67	4.46	0.70
My visit has inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more	4.63	0.60	4.33	0.83
My visit has inspired me contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions	4.60	0.64	4.36	0.82
My visit has inspired me to advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions	4.64	0.62	4.41	0.80
During my visit, I felt an active part of Mexican culture and traditions	4.41	0.81	4.08	1.01

However, the differences were statistically significant for six of the 10 items: my visit has been fun ($t(541) = 2, p < .05, d = 0.2$, small effect), my visit has been satisfactory ($t(541) = 1.84, p < .1, d = 0.2$, small effect), my visit inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more ($t(541) = 4.67, p < .001, d = 0.4$, medium effect), my visit inspired me to contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions ($t(541) = 3.62, p < .001, d = 0.3$, medium effect), my visit inspired me to advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions ($t(541) = 3.67, p < .001, d = 0.3$, medium effect), and during my visit, I felt an active part of Mexican culture and traditions ($t(541) = 4.1, p < .001, d = 0.4$, medium effect). Therefore, H7 was partially supported.

Perceived Authenticity and Visit Characteristics

This study also examined whether the duration of time spent at a destination (H8) and previous visits (H9) have any association with its perceived authenticity. Weak, significant association was found between the overall experience dimension of perceived authenticity and the time spent by a participant in the park ($r = .095, p < .05$). However, none of the individual items on the perceived authenticity scale obtained a significant association with time spent in the park, partially supporting H8.

Table 6. Means of responses of first time tourists and repeat visitors

Items	Visited Xcaret before			
	Yes (n=149)		No (n=381)	
	M	SD	M	SD
My visit has inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more	4.67	0.55	4.35	0.81
My visit has inspired me contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions	4.55	0.68	4.41	0.79
My visit has inspired me to advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions	4.63	0.60	4.45	0.79
During my visit, I have felt active part of Mexican culture and traditions	4.34	0.83	4.15	0.99

Independent sample t-tests revealed that first time visitors evaluated active engagement dimension lower than repeat visitors ($t(528) = 2.28, p < .05, d = 0.2$, medium effect). This difference was also found for all the items that comprise this dimension (Table 6): my visit inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more ($t(528) = 4.45, p < .001, d = 0.4$, medium effect), my visit inspired me to contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions ($t(528) = 1.8, p < .1, d = 0.2$, small effect), my visit inspired me to advocate for conserving Mexican culture and traditions ($t(528) = 2.45, p < .05, d = 0.3$, medium effect), and during my visit, I have felt an active part of Mexican culture and traditions ($t(528) = 2.12, p < .05, d = 0.2$, medium effect). Therefore, H9 was partially supported.

Perceived Authenticity and Sources Of Information

Finally, this study explored the sources of information that are most influential in tourists' perceived authenticity evaluations. Results of multiple linear regressions showed, park's website and social media were found to have significant influence on both the dimensions of perceived authenticity. For overall experience, receiving information from the park's website had a positive influence ($B = 0.05, p < .001$) and social media a negative influence ($B = -0.05, p < .01$). Similarly, active engagement was positively influenced by the park's website as an information source ($B = 0.03, p < .05$) and negatively by social media ($B = -0.06, p < .001$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of perceived authenticity on tourists' relationship with a destination, and how these perceptions are shaped by the destination's public relations efforts to construct and convey its image. Using a variety of methodological approaches including focus group and interviews with practitioners, and face-to-face intercept survey with visitors of a theme park in Mexico, the study comprehensively examined how destinations can cultivate trust, satisfaction, and long-term commitment with visitors. Additionally, the study investigated the variations in perceived authenticity in relation to visitors' demographics, visit-specific characteristics, and sources used to gather information about a destination to identify the most effective strategies to segment and target potential visitors.

A destination's image develops through a dynamic interaction between the key characteristics that it promotes to external publics and the publics' interpretation of these communication claims (Wan & Schell, 2007). Therefore, to understand the park's projected image, the study started by examining the attitudes and opinions of its public relations practitioners. The practitioners described Xcaret as a special place that represents Mexico, its culture and traditions, natural richness, and diversity. The park's association to Mexican and Mayan cultural traditions and history is an identifying feature that the park emphasizes in its communication with external publics.

Quantitative findings revealed that Xcaret's visitors also associate the park with similar attributes. Survey participants indicated that they witnessed expressions of Mexico's culture and traditions in the park and its various elements including buildings and architecture, shows and activities, food, music, and employees' actions and behaviors, which also positively influenced visitors' perceptions of an authentic experience.

The study found that visitors' overall experience with the park and active engagement with its mission and values enhanced the park's perceived authenticity. The high means obtained for items that describe the active engagement dimension such as "inspired me to value Mexican culture and traditions more" and "motivated me to contribute to the preservation of Mexican culture and traditions" supported Knudsen and Waade's (2010) claims about performative authenticity; a feeling that is experienced and performed by visitors in a tourism setting. The findings showed that Xcaret's efforts to preserve Mexican and Mayan culture and traditions and present them to the tourists inspired emotional/affective relatedness among them and enhanced performative authenticity of the park.

Additionally, the two dimensions of authenticity, i.e., overall experience and active engagement, represented the interplay between the park's messages and actions. Xcaret's public relations staff emphasized their role as storytellers and ambassadors responsible for providing visitors with an experience of the park's mission and values. Similarly, the park and its employees strive to generate opportunities to actively engage visitors with Mexican culture and traditions through performances, activities, and shows.

This dynamic interaction between a destination's communication and actions further supported Molleda's (2010a) recommendation that communication plans, programs, or campaigns cannot achieve authenticity unless the underlying object, person, or organization in its true essence represents an authentic being. Further, the two dimensions also reflect the iconic and indexical authenticity of the park (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). While the Mayan ruins and sites represent the park's iconic authenticity by virtue of its historic association to an actual civilization, the cultural performances and shows recreate a deep-rooted tradition from the past emphasizing its indexical authenticity.

Findings of the path analysis confirmed that a destination's image has a positive influence on visitors' evaluation of its authenticity. Scholars argued that authenticity is an evaluation of whether or not tourists' direct experiences are consistent with their opinions and impressions about a destination, which in turn are shaped by how a destination chooses to portray itself (Molleda & Jain, 2013a; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). The path analysis showed that the degree to which Xcaret's visitors observed or noticed the manifestations of Mexico's culture and traditions in the park and its various elements had a positive influence on the park's perceived authenticity.

The findings also confirmed that an authentic tourism experience enhances tourists' trust, satisfaction, and long-term commitment with a destination. This is a significant finding from both reputation and relationship cultivation perspectives as it reflects a way

to evaluate the value of public relations efforts in building an image that not only enhances a destination's authenticity but is also instrumental in cultivating relationship with visitors. Notably, the study found that a destination's perceived authenticity is also an important driver of visitors' behavioral intentions to seek information about the park, visit again, and recommend it to family and friends, demonstrating the value of this construct for public relations research and practice. Measuring the impact of public relations efforts in terms of behavioral and action outcomes is an important endeavor for the field (Hon and J. Grunig, 1999; Yang, 2007) and this study contributed to this research stream by illustrating how perceptions of authenticity can significantly affect visitors' intended behavior, actions, and decisions.

Another important finding of this study is that people differ in their perceptions of authenticity, demonstrating the subjective and contextual nature of the construct. The findings showed that domestic visitors of Xcaret evaluated the active engagement dimension higher than the international visitors. This finding could be explained by the lack of familiarity of international visitors with Mexican culture coupled with the fact that the park cancelled some of the cultural shows and performances during the last three days of data collection in preparation for a new show that Xcaret plans to introduce.

This finding is different from what Molleda and Jain (2013a) observed in their study. The authors found that out-of-state visitors evaluated the festival's authenticity higher than the natives. An explanation of this difference is the unique context in which the two studies were conducted. While the current study examined the perceived authenticity of Xcaret during a regular tourism season, Molleda and Jain analyzed the experiences of visitors during a special event created around a unique cultural and traditional theme. This difference might suggest that it is more challenging to convince domestic visitors about the authentic representation of a deep rooted cultural tradition. This finding supported Cohen's (1988) and MacCannell's (1973) claims about staged authenticity, i.e. commoditization of cultural products to attract tourists renders them fake and meaningless to local people.

However, perceived authenticity evaluations were not found to vary with age or gender. These findings might suggest that Xcaret offers a range of experiences that people of all ages like and find authentic.

Similar to Moscardo and Pearce (1986), this study found that previous visits to a destination significantly influence its perceived authenticity evaluations by tourists. Findings showed that tourists who were revisiting the park evaluated its authenticity higher than first time visitors. This observation could be explained by the fact that people who revisit the park are more aware of its cultural associations and might be more actively engaged in its mission to preserve the Mexican culture and traditions. Interestingly though, the number of times a participant had visited Xcaret was found to have no significant influence on their evaluation of the park's perceived authenticity. This finding might suggest that authentic experiences remain unchanged over time, unless the setting in which they take place and its activities change dramatically from their original state. However, the finding warrants further investigation.

Finally, in terms of sources of information, the park's website was found to have a positive and social media a negative influence on its perceived authenticity. These findings suggest that the information obtained on social media might not have been similar to what participants experienced in the park. In fact, the cancellation of some of the shows and performances during the last three days of data collection could have affected the perceived authenticity evaluation of visitors who obtained information about the park from social media. Social media represents a public platform where people share their experiences and interact with others. It could be assumed that visitors read about these shows on social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter and were disappointed by their cancellation during their visit to Xcaret.

Knudsen and Waade (2010) explained that media plays a significant role in the construct of authenticity by producing representations of a place, which can not only inspire people to visit a destination but also provide a platform for tourists to validate a destination's media image with their actual experiences. Therefore, this finding suggests that public relations practitioners of Xcaret should consider revising their communication approach on social media to present more accurate and updated information about the park and its offerings.

IMPLICATIONS TO PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study has several theoretical and practical implications. The study examined a vital construct that remains under-studied in public relations literature lacking theoretical understanding and empirical support (Molleda & Jain, 2013a; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). The study provides a measurement scale for perceived authenticity that is more parsimonious (10 versus 13 items) and has better internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ versus 0.81) than the index that Molleda and Jain (2013a) proposed. Hence, the study addressed an important gap in the scholarship by collecting qualitative and quantitative responses from public relations practitioners and tourists to broaden our understanding of perceived authenticity. As the study demonstrated, perceived authenticity has the potential to enhance visitors' trust, satisfaction, and commitment with a destination, and should be actively examined through empirical research to continue building theory in this area.

Another value of this study is in identifying the integral role that public relations can perform in enhancing a destination's perceived authenticity by articulating and promoting an image that resonates with its true offerings. Tourism promotion has evolved as an important area for public relations research and practice (Choi & Cai, 2012). Tourists' expectations are often influenced by how a destination promotes itself through various strategic communication efforts and what aspects of its image it chooses to highlight in its messages. The findings revealed that a destination's image has a positive influence on its perceived authenticity demonstrating the centrality of public relations efforts in enhancing tourists' evaluations of a destination's authenticity.

In this manner, the study also contributed to the growing body of research in public

relations measurement and evaluation, an on-going challenge and opportunity for the field. By operationalizing and quantifying the linkage between public relations efforts and organization-public relational outcomes and public's intended behavior, this study provides research evidence of value of public relations in achieving organizational objectives and contributes to theory building in relationship management.

The study is particularly useful for public relations practitioners working in the tourism sector. The improved measurement scale of perceived authenticity can provide practitioners with an evidence-based measurement scale to develop, communicate, and evaluate a destination's authenticity and would help in demonstrating the value of their efforts. For public relations and communication agencies this research would suggest ways for developing new services helping destinations develop an authentic image.

The study also identified key areas that a destination should highlight in its strategic communication messages. Findings revealed that a destination's promotional materials should contain information about its food, music, buildings and architecture, shows and activities, and employees' actions and behavior. These attributes of a destination's identity and reputation are more likely to enhance its perceived authenticity and ultimately, visitors' trust, satisfaction and intended behavior. The study also showed that marketers, planners, and policymakers should attempt to develop an image that facilitates tourists' overall experience at and active engagement with a destination. This study's findings could help practitioners re-evaluate their tourism promotion strategies and tactics to integrate key aspects of authenticity.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study makes significant contributions to the theory and practice of public relations, it has some limitations that should be addressed. First, this study was conducted at a cultural theme park in Mexico and therefore its findings should be interpreted in that context. Future research should test the proposed relationships at other destinations. Also, the study only considered the relationship between image and perceived authenticity. However, future studies could examine other causal elements that might have not been accounted for by the study. Finally, this study did not use a random sampling procedure to collect survey responses. While sample bias is a concern related to intercept surveys, it can be addressed by collecting data at varying times to ensure that the variability within the population of interest is represented. For this study, data was collected over a five-day period in an attempt to collect a range of responses from the visitors of the park on different days. However, future studies could identify ways in which random sample collection can be conducted to further validate the findings of this study.

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