

**Can food tourism be an authentic experience? A systematic literature review**

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## **Abstract**

***Purpose:*** The purpose of this study is to provide a synthesis and an extended discussion of the literature relating to authenticity and food tourism. It presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of the academic literature and provides insights into the specific issues addressed by studies in this area.

***Design/methodology/approach:*** A search of major research databases with multiple keywords was performed to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles dated between 2008-2018. A total of 39 articles were identified and analysed using NVivo. Based on a qualitative thematic analysis, three themes were identified; defining authenticity, authenticity and food tourism and tourists' perceptions of authenticity.

***Findings:*** Authenticity in tourism research is studied from three perspectives; objective, constructive and existential authenticity. For the tourist, food can be an amalgamation of all three perspectives. Furthermore, tourists are increasingly searching for an authentic experience. Food can represent an authentic experience as it can connect the tourist with the people, landscape and culture of their destination.

***Research implications:*** This study contributes to the current body of knowledge on authenticity and food tourism. The analysis of the different issues addressed by the literature could build the foundation for future research.

***Originality/value:*** This study presents a comprehensive review of the literature on authenticity in food tourism. It can serve as a roadmap of literature for both academics and practitioners and help stimulate further interest.

***Keywords:*** Food tourism, systematic review, objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, existential authenticity,

## **1. Introduction**

Narrowly defined food tourism can be described as a form of travel where the primary motivation is to experience the food or drink of a place (Hall and Mitchell, 2005; Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Sims, 2009). It is an experiential trip where the tourist actively takes part in the food experience, rather than just observing (Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez- Canizares, 2012).

Despite the extensive literature surrounding food tourism, no clear definition of the term exists, with words such as ‘food’, ‘culinary’ and ‘gastronomy’ often used interchangeably (Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez- Canizares, 2012; Wolf, 2014). Additionally, some researchers contend that the terms food tourism, culinary tourism or gastronomy tourism all have the same meaning, that is travelling to a place to experience its food (Geng-Qing Chi et al., 2010).

Studies show that a growing number of tourists are travelling to destinations seeking foods and food experiences considered traditional or local (Okumus et al., 2007). Furthermore, tourists are increasingly seeking local, authentic and novel experiences associated with the places or destinations they visit (Beer, 2008). Similarly, Fáilte Ireland stresses that the authenticity of food offerings is a vital component of the visitor experience (Fáilte Ireland, 2018).

This paper aims to identify and critically examine to what extent tourism literature has focused on the relationship between food tourism and authenticity. This paper aims to contribute to the development of studies in this area by providing a synthesis of the research on authenticity and food tourism. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach was adopted, ensuring the literature was evaluated in a rigorous, transparent and reproducible manner (Gomezelj, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, articles were bound by time and type of journal. A time interval of 2008-2018 was chosen to identify the coverage of the topic of authenticity and food tourism aligning with a decade where increasingly, food tourism has been the focus of research. Over this timeframe, articles relevant to tourism, travel, leisure and hospitality were identified through multiple keywords search on major research databases.

The paper is structured as follows, firstly a background to the research is presented, followed by a review of the methodology process. Next, the major fields and themes are presented. The paper concludes by highlighting the limitations, implications of this paper. Subsequently, the paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

## 2. Background to the research

### 2.1 Food tourism

The role of food in tourism has dramatically gained importance among tourism researchers in the last decade (Bjork and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014, 2017; Everett and Slocum, 2013; Stone et al., 2018; Wolf, 2014). While earlier studies focused on food tourism as a niche tourism market (Kivela and Crotts, 2008), recent literature suggests that, such is the increase in tourists actively participating in a wide variety of food experiences that food tourism should be considered a distinct sector in its own right (Everett, 2016; Stone and Migacz, 2016).

Many different terms have been applied to express the connection between ‘food’ and ‘tourism’ including ‘food tourism’, ‘culinary tourism’, and ‘gastronomy tourism’ (Lopez-Guzman and Sanchez- Canizares, 2012; Wolf, 2014). As a result, several authors have attempted to defined food tourism, gastronomic tourism, and/or culinary tourism. However, Everett and Slocum (2013) argue that the vast array of food tourism initiatives makes defining “food tourism” problematic. Yet it is argued that there are considerable distinctions between the other terms (Sanchez-Cañizares, and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). For example, Smith and Xiao (2008, p.289) characterise culinary tourism as:

Any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates, or consumes branded local culinary resources. Furthermore, culinary tourism is when culinary experiences occur, though these are not the primary motivation for the trip.

Consequently, culinary travel is not only about ‘exploration and adventure’ (Kivela and Crotts, 2009, p. 164) but also represents a ‘cultural encounter’ (Kivela and Crotts, 2009, p. 181) as tourists seek out local foods, restaurants and food experiences unique to a place. Expanding on this definition Williams et al. (2013, p.4) add that culinary tourism also ‘encompasses authentic food traditions and the social context of food’, and implies ‘the passing on of these traditions and cultures’ to the tourist. However, the suitability of the term is contested, as in etymological terms, the word culinary derives from the word cuisine, meaning to cook. Therefore, using this term can imply that all culinary tourists cook (Robinson and Getz, 2013) which is not the case. It is further suggested by Wolf (2014), that the term culinary tourism may imply high-end experiences.

On the other hand, gastronomy tourism refers to;

(Those) tourists and visitors who plan their trips partially or totally in order to taste the cuisine of the place or to carry out activities related to gastronomy. (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2012, p. 7)

Again, the appropriateness of this term is questioned by Robinson et al., (2016), who argues that ‘gastronomy’ and the related terms of ‘gourmand’ and ‘gourmet’ have disparaging connotations and often imply an elitist or intellectualised view of food preparation and dining.

Despite the various terms used to describe this sector of tourism, it is argued that tourists are increasingly travelling for food experiences (Okumus et al., 2007), but maybe, in fact, tourists seek authentic food experiences (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014; Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Sims, 1999). Using a qualitative approach, this paper aims to investigate this argument and determine if food tourism can be an authentic experience.

## **2. Methodology**

The aim of a literature review is to ‘establish what is already known about a topic’ (Bryman, 2015, p.90) and ‘to specify a research question to develop the existing body of knowledge (Tranfield et al., 2003, p.208). Thus, a literature review forms the background and justification for a study. There are two main types of literature review; narrative reviews and systematic reviews (Bryman, 2015). Narrative reviews are traditional reviews providing an account of the literature as an end in itself. Whereas, SLRs use explicit procedures which aim to synthesise and analyse a body of literature. This method is based on the use of keywords search of the literature in selected databases (Gomezelj, 2016). Traditionally SLRs have been applied to research in disciplines favouring positivist and quantitative approaches (Tranfield et al., 2003), such as medicine or healthcare. However, SLRs are increasingly used in tourism studies (Veal, 2017).

This study adopted the SLR process as it offers a more objective and transparent alternative to the traditional narrative review method (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). Moreover, this study implemented the three-stage SLR process as set out by Jesson et al (2011), including;

- Defining the research question and designing the search strategy
- Applying inclusion, exclusion criteria and quality assessment

- Synthesising the results

Each of these stages is outlined in more detail below.

## **2.1 Defining the research question and designing the search strategy**

The first stage of the SLR is to define the research question. The primary aim of this paper is to answer the research question, *is authenticity relevant to food tourism?* Having defined the research question, the next step involved identifying keywords which could subsequently be used to perform a search through the body of literature. The following keywords were identified: Authenticity, Food and Tourism. However, as previously mentioned, different terms have been applied to express the connection between ‘food’ and ‘tourism’ including ‘food tourism’, ‘culinary tourism’, and ‘gastronomy tourism’ (Sanchez-Cañizares, and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015; Wolf, 2014). Therefore, it was necessary to conduct a search for the terms “culinary tourism” and “gastronomy tourism” as well as “food tourism”.

Additionally, Boolean searching was applied to narrow the search and specify exactly what was required and therefore excluding any irrelevant articles. Boolean searching works “by using logical operators and specific syntax” (Hart, 2005, p.153). The following search strings were used:

- “authentic\*” AND “food tourism”
- “authentic\*” AND “culinary tourism”
- “authentic\*” AND “gastronomy tourism”

Furthermore, the Boolean search also allowed for truncation. This is a way of capturing all relevant material by searching words and phrases which use the same root (Hart, 2005, p.153). In this case, the term “authentic\*” will return all words which use the root authentic, including authentic, authenticity and authenticities.

Having identified the key terms and the relevant search strings, the next step was to identify appropriate research databases where relevant articles could be extracted. As such, the search was limited to peer-reviewed journals in the following databases:

1. Taylor and Francis Online
2. Science Direct
3. Emerald Insight
4. Sage Journals

These databases were selected as they contain publications relevant to tourism, leisure and hospitality fields. Table 1, which follows, outlines the number of articles found in each database by the specific search string used.

Database searched	Initial search results for the terms “Food tourism’ and authentic*’	Initial search results for the terms ‘culinary tourism’ and authentic*’	Initial search results for the terms ‘gastronomy tourism’ and authentic*’
Taylor and Francis Online	169	161	28
ScienceDirect	105	66	56
Emerald Insight	57	36	13
Sage Journals	50	45	4

#### 2.4 Inclusion exclusion criteria and quality assessment

The next step in the SLR process was to apply inclusion criteria. Initially, only peer-reviewed results were included in the search. This ensuring that articles collected have been subjected to approval from those knowledgeable in the subject investigated (Jesson et al., 2011). Secondly, all results were bound by a time interval of 2008-2018, aligning with a decade where there has been an increase in research relating to food tourism (Bjork and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014, 2017; Everett and Slocum, 2013; Stone et al., 2018; Wolf, 2014). Lastly, articles were further refined to locate articles in the field of “tourism, leisure and hospitality”. By applying these criteria, the number of articles was reduced from 790 to 435, as highlighted in Table 2.

**Table 2: Refinement of search results for key terms**

Database searched	Search results for the terms 'Food tourism' and authentic*, within peer-reviewed hospitality and tourism journals, published 2008-2018.	Search results for the terms 'culinary tourism' and authentic*, within peer-reviewed hospitality and tourism journals, published 2008-2018	Search results for the terms 'gastronomy tourism' and authentic*, within peer-reviewed hospitality and tourism journals, published 2008-2018
Taylor and Francis Online	89	70	13
ScienceDirect	50	39	26
Emerald Insight	57	35	13
Sage Journals	4	34	4

These results were then further refined by limiting the search of key terms to the journal abstracts only. This ensured that food tourism, culinary tourism or gastronomy tourism and authenticity was the main focus of each article. This further reduced the results from 435 to 41, as presented in Table 3. Subsequently, after the removal of two duplicate articles, the final count amounted to 39 articles.

**Table 3: The final search results for key terms**

Database searched	Search Results for the terms 'Food tourism' and authentic*, further refined to search abstract only	Search Results for the terms 'culinary tourism' and authentic*, further refined to search abstracts only	Search Results for the terms 'Gastronomy tourism' and authentic*, further refined to search abstracts only
Taylor and Francis online	6	5	0
Science Direct	5	1	1
Emerald Insight	10	7	0
Sage Journals	1	2	4



## **2.6 Synthesising the results**

The final step in the SLR process involved synthesising the results found by organising returned articles into groups of meta-themes, analysing findings within each theme and finally synthesising overall findings. The 39 articles, as presented in Table 3, were imported into Nvivo as full text PDFs for content analysis. NVivo is a software program used for the organisation and analysis of unstructured text and can be used to identify reoccurring themes within a data set.

Using NVivo, content themes were generated and verified using manual coding and subsequent word and text queries. Firstly, the abstract of each article was reviewed and coded in terms of how authenticity and food tourism was referenced in the article. Secondly, the content was coded into themes dependent on how each article discussed authenticity. For example, articles were grouped into themes relating to perspectives of authenticity, such as objective authenticity, constructed or staged authenticity, and existential authenticity. Thirdly, additional analysis was undertaken using word search and text search queries on all articles.

This process formed the basis for the following findings, enabling the author to extract from the published peer-reviewed literature, relevant information relating to authenticity and food tourism.

## **3. Findings**

This paper used NVivo to conduct a thematic analysis of the literature with reference to food tourism and authenticity. Based on an analysis of 39 articles, three themes were identified; 1) Defining authenticity, 2) Food tourism and authenticity 3) Tourists' perceptions of authenticity. The following section provides a detailed analysis of the literature based on each of these themes. The section concludes by addressing the research question to examine if food tourism can be an authentic experience.

### **3.1 Defining authenticity**

The literature shows that a wide range of attempts have been made in an effort to define the concept. As a result, 'there are at least as many definitions of authenticity as there are those

who write about it” (Taylor, 2008, p.8). However common themes emerge with words such as original, real, genuine, true, honest often used (Özdemir and Seyitoğlu, 2017).

With respect to food, Richards (2012) states that authenticity represents a quality, attributed to arrange of foods specific to a geographical region. Richards further suggests that such products are the result of a cultural process that belongs to that specific place. Likewise, Sims (2009) and Everett and Aitchison (2008) contend that food represents a destinations intangible heritage and through its consumption, the tourist can gain an authentic experience.

Further research shows that the concept of authenticity in food tourism has been studied from three perspectives; objective authenticity, staged authenticity and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity, refers to whether something can be conveyed and interpreted as authentic or not (Wang, 1999, cited in Sims, 2009). It is based on the genuineness of objects and is verified by an expert. Staged authenticity, refers to where an experience has been modified or constructed to meet expectations of the tourist (Chhabra, 2010). Whereas existential authenticity is where the tourist forms an understanding of authenticity based on their beliefs, expectations or previous experiences (Sims, 2009; Walter, 2017).

O’ Donovan, et al., (2015) contend that food can be an amalgamation of objective, constructive and existential authenticity, as foods which are authentic to an area afford the opportunity for the tourist to absorb and experience a culture and engage with its people. Drawing on this concept, the following section will detail the three strands of authenticity within food tourism.

### **3.2.1 Objective authenticity and food tourism**

As already mentioned, objective authenticity is based on originality and the genuineness of objects, as verified by experts (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Thus, objective authenticity only exists after a tangible evaluation by experts (Sims, 2009). With regards to food, there are a number of policies and legislation which can verify objective authenticity. For example, the European Union’s ‘Quality Schemes for Agricultural Products and Foodstuffs’ uses a number of scientific and analytical methods including evidence of place of origin to prove the authenticity of a food product. After rigorous testing, if a food product is deemed authentic, it is provided with a stamp and labelled. In addition to providing proof of authenticity, this legislation also protects the unique and distinctive qualities in food products which in turn can be used to promote the authentic nature of such a food (Sanchez-Cañizares, and Castillo-Canalejo, 2015).

### **3.2.2 Constructed authenticity and food tourism**

Constructed authenticity refers to an approach where tourists judge how authentic something is based on their own experiences (Wang, 1999 as cited in Sims, 1999) and as such is a subjectively social construction (Sims, 1999). Thus, this results in often results in ‘various versions of authenticities regarding the same object (Wang, 1999, as cited in Sims, 1999). Additionally, this form of authenticity can be ‘constructed’ or ‘staged’ for the benefit of tourists (Sims, 2009). To illustrate this point, Chhabra (2011) identifies the terms constructed and negotiated authenticity. Explaining that an authentic experience can be altered to suit a tourist. For instance, this could be as simple as changing an ingredient to suit a tourist’s palate or changing a production method to be more efficient.

Additionally, Johnson and Baumann (2007, as cited in Robinson and Clifford, 2012) emphasise that ‘certain qualities are framed to create the perception of authenticity’, and as such authenticity is a social construction. It is suggested that creation by hand and the local setting both add to the social construction of authenticity. They, identify four qualities pertaining to food that are used to frame a food as authentic; geographic specificity, simplicity, personal connections and historicism. Geographic references relate to provenance which can denote cultural and ethnic origin. Simplicity embodies concepts of handmade or traditional and rusticity. Personal connotations denote ‘food with a face’ i.e. a celebrity chef, or a food’s connection to a creative talent or family artisanal tradition. Historicism refers to food traditions and the test of time, as opposed to a trend (Johnson and Baumann, 2007, as cited in Robinson and Clifford, 2012).

### **3.2.4 Existential authenticity and food tourism**

Existential authenticity relies on personal experiences and perceptions (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). In this context, the tourist develops an understanding of authenticity in response to previous experiences (Cohen, 2015; Sims, 2009) and is often an activity-based approach (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Informed by these perspectives, research on existential authenticity tends to concentrate on “individuals’ feelings, emotions, sensations, relationships, and sense of self” (Rickly-Boyd, 2013, p. 683). It is this understanding of authenticity which has witnessed the greatest growth in tourism literature in recent years (Sims, 2009; Rickly-Boyd 2012, 2013; Robinson and Clifford, 2012).

The concept of existential authenticity as linked to a sense of self is important in relation to the provision of food and drink as tourists may seek to develop an authentic sense of self

through the purchase of particular products (Sims, 2009). For example, Cohen (2015) argues that contemporary tourists seek to experience encounters with cultures and experience the existential authenticity that comes from being their 'authentic selves'. Therefore, it is the tourist themselves who affirms the sense of authenticity (Cohen, 2015). In a similar vein, Sims (2009), contends that the tourist's enjoyment of a meal is often more about the feelings provoked in the individual, rather than the food consumed. For example, the personal satisfaction that comes from sharing food in a relaxed holiday setting is just as important as the food (Sims, 2009).

In response to the debate regarding the concept of authenticity, Cohen (2015) argues that, if we are to understand the motivations of tourist behaviour we must first comprehend the way in which the concept is understood by the tourists themselves (Sims, 2009). Therefore, the section which follows examines tourist perceptions of authenticity.

### **3.3 Tourists' perceptions of authentic food**

Research shows that authenticity is as much about meeting expectations as it is about providing a true representation of an experience (Jayne et al., 2012). Thus, if the experience is not corresponding to the tourists' perception then a sense of authenticity can be lost (Sims, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to understand what factors influence tourists' perceptions of authenticity. Therefore, the term an 'authentic experience' is almost always open to interpretation. Accordingly, understanding the cues that signal authenticity to tourists is important. Jang et al, (2012) and Ram et al (2016) suggest that where food is consumed or produced embodies authenticity. While Youn and Kim (2017), suggest that unfamiliar ingredients, unique food names and stories relating to the food origins help form tourists' perceptions of authenticity.

The perception of authenticity can play an essential role in tourism in two ways. Firstly, it can enhance the tourist experience by connecting the tourist with the heritage of a destination (Sims, 2009). Secondly, it is an essential element for experiencing the culture of a place (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014).

#### **4.1 Can food tourism be an authentic experience?**

The main aim of this paper was to determine if food tourism can offer an authentic experience. From the SLR it is clear that there are three perspectives of authenticity objective, constructive,

and existential. Furthermore, it is apparent that food can offer tourists an amalgamation of all three perspectives. It offers tourists an opportunity to be absorbed in a destination's culture and experience its people. Additionally, food as a personification of the self, allows tourists to understand and appreciate relationships between the people, landscapes and culture.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study had the objective of investigating if food tourism can offer a tourist an authentic experience. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) process, themes were identified from peer-reviewed articles. Three themes were identified from the literature including, 1) Defining authenticity, 2) Food tourism and authenticity 3) Tourists' perceptions of authenticity.

Firstly, defining the concept of authenticity, it can be concluded that the term authenticity is regarded as an idea, a conceptual commodity of subjective size and value. Moreover, the term of authenticity is associated with terms of genuineness, truth, realness, accuracy, trustworthiness, honesty, timelessness, uniqueness, originality and differentness. Furthermore, it consists of three strands; objective, constructive and existential. Secondly, tourists are increasingly searching for an authentic experience. Food can represent an authentic experience as it can connect the tourist with the people, landscape and culture of their destination. Finally, tourists have varying perceptions relating to the authenticity of a place and are seeking typical signs of a place that accord with their perceptions (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014).

The overall aim of this paper was to determine if food tourism can offer an authentic experience. Using an SLR, approach this paper concluded that food tourism provides the tourist with the opportunity to experience objective, constructed and existential authenticity.

### **4.1 Implications**

This paper provides an overview of how food tourism can provide an authentic experience. From the point of view of a destination, it is possible to use the tourist's desire for authenticity to encourage the development of products and services. Local food production can encourage the involvement of residents, strengthening culture and identity and, in some cases, becoming the basis for effective destination marketing (Ferrari and Gilli, 2015). Thus, benefiting the region by attracting more visitors and investment (Sims, 2009). Additionally, by using the three strands of authenticity, different local food products and experiences could be developed appealing to tourists differing perceptions of authenticity.

## **4.2 Limitations**

This paper used the SLR process to identify articles showing if food tourism can offer an authentic experience. The SLR process offers many advantages to researchers, offering a reliable alternative to a traditional literature review, that seeks to reduce bias (Pittaway et al., 2004). However, a number of limitations can be identified (Jesson et al., 2011; Bryman, 2012). The four databases chosen for this study were intended to capture a wide range of tourism, leisure and hospitality journals. However, this selection does not necessarily capture all the journals where tourism scholars may publish research, particularly research closely aligned with authenticity. For instance, some researchers may select interdisciplinary journals rather than journals focused on a specific topic.

Another limitation of this study concerns the choice of terms for the literature search. Although it is believed that the right descriptors have been used, articles dealing with this subject under different labels may have been missed.

Finally, articles were bound by a timeframe of ten years, 2008-2018, therefore important, theoretical studies, such as those by Cohen (2002), MacCannell (1981) and Wang (1999), were not included in the analysis. However, articles which used or described their various theories relating to authenticity were included in the review. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study can serve as a guide which could stimulate further interest in food tourism and authenticity.

## **4.3 Future research**

From the literature review, it appears to be a relative lack of research on the personal dimensions of food tourism and authenticity from an Irish perspective. Pursuing a quantitative approach, incorporating authenticity scales from tourism literature (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Sidali et al., 2014) would advance knowledge in this area. Additionally, an in-depth qualitative approach could be pursued to determine tourist perceptions of food authenticity and locality in an Irish context. Moreover, the issue of authenticity and locality from a food provider's perspective is an intriguing one which could be usefully explored in further research. It would be interesting to understand how they attempt to manage and understand the three strands of authenticity and whether these are an encumbrance or an asset to their business.

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