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## Staged vs. Existential Authenticity: A Comparison of Antalya and Gaziantep on the Axis of Mass and Gastronomy Tourism

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### Abstract

This study examines the concept of authenticity in tourism through the theoretical lens of Erik Cohen's (1972) tourist typology. Utilizing a qualitative comparative case study methodology, the paper analyzes two contrasting Turkish destinations: Antalya, a prime example of mass tourism, and Gaziantep, a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy. The findings reveal that Antalya's tourism model, centered on "all-inclusive" resorts, primarily offers "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973) that caters to the expectations of organized and individual mass tourists seeking comfort and predictability. Conversely, Gaziantep's focus on gastronomic heritage and local culture provides opportunities for "existential authenticity" (Ning, 1999) through participatory experiences, such as gastronomy workshops and visits to local markets, attracting tourists who align with Cohen's explorer and drifter types. The study concludes that Cohen's typology remains a powerful explanatory framework for understanding how different tourist segments negotiate authenticity in contemporary tourism. The results offer practical implications for destination managers regarding authenticity-based marketing and sustainable tourism planning.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Problem and Significance of the Research

In the field of tourism, the concept of "authenticity" has become a central topic of discussion in understanding the tourist experience since the second half of the 20th century. The pioneering work of MacCannell (1973; 1976) revealed that the modern tourist's desire to see the "real" is often satisfied through "staged" spaces and events produced by the tourism industry. This perspective positions the tourist experience not merely as an economic activity, but also as a social and cultural performance. Influenced by Boorstin's (1964) critique of the "pseudo-event," this approach has turned tourism into a field for examining the relationship between reality and representation in modern society. In the 1990s, Ning (1999) moved this discussion to a more subjective ground by developing the concept of "existential authenticity." According to Ning, what is important for the tourist is not whether what they see is objectively "real," but rather the experiences of belonging, self-discovery, and personal renewal they undergo during their travels. Thus, authenticity is treated not only as an intrinsic quality of the destination but also as an experience that forms within the individual's inner world.

## 1.2. The Aim and Questions of the Research

To better understand tourists' quests for authenticity, the tourist typology developed by [Cohen \(1972\)](#) also serves as an important analytical tool. Cohen categorizes tourists into roles such as the organized mass tourist, the individual mass tourist, the explorer, and the drifter, based on their motivations and travel styles. This study examines how the search for authenticity in tourism is shaped within the framework of Cohen's tourist typology by comparing two different tourism centers in Turkey: Antalya, a prime example of mass tourism in the Mediterranean, and Gaziantep, a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network for its gastronomic heritage. While Antalya, with its "all-inclusive" resorts and package tours, offers a contemporary example of the staged authenticity proposed by [MacCannell \(1973\)](#), Gaziantep, thanks to its rich culinary culture and local production processes, creates a participatory and identity-based tourist experience consistent with [Ning's \(1999\)](#) concept of existential authenticity. This comparison aims both to test the validity of Cohen's typology in explaining current tourism trends and to provide guidance for destination managers on authenticity-based marketing and sustainable tourism planning.

## 1.3. The Scope and Limitations of the Research

This study covers the concept of authenticity through the lens of Cohen's tourist typology, focusing on the destinations of Antalya and Gaziantep, which represent two contrasting tourism models: mass tourism and gastronomy tourism. The research is designed as a comparative case study based on a theoretical framework. Its primary limitation is that it does not collect primary field data, instead relying on reliable secondary data sources such as statistics from the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, UNESCO reports, and peer-reviewed academic articles.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Concept of Authenticity in the Sociology of Tourism

Since the mid-20th century, the concept of authenticity has become a central theoretical axis in the sociology of tourism for explaining the meaning of the touristic experience. Three pioneering scholars—Daniel Boorstin, Dean MacCannell, and Ning Ning—have each shaped the debate from different perspectives.

#### Boorstin and the “Pseudo-Event”.

In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, [Boorstin \(1964\)](#) argues that modern mass media and the tourism industry produce pseudo-events—experiences staged primarily for consumption rather than for their intrinsic cultural reality. According to Boorstin, tourists do not encounter the “real” but rather a pre-arranged representation; destinations are simplified and sterilized to meet visitors' expectations. In this view, the tourist becomes a passive consumer and authenticity is inevitably lost as tourism grows.

#### MacCannell and “Staged Authenticity”.

Challenging Boorstin's pessimistic stance, [MacCannell \(1973; 1976\)](#) depicts the tourist as a modern pilgrim seeking “real” life in order to escape the alienation of modern society. Tourists attempt to penetrate the back stage of local life, beyond the superficial front stage that communities display. Yet, in responding to this quest, the tourism industry deliberately arranges and exhibits elements of local culture, thereby creating performances of

authenticity. MacCannell calls this process staged authenticity, arguing that authenticity in tourism is not simply discovered but continuously produced and marketed as a social performance.

### Ning and “Existential Authenticity”.

Shifting the debate from objective reality to subjective experience, Ning (1999) introduces the notion of existential authenticity. What matters to tourists, he contends, is not whether an event is historically “real,” but the inner experiences—self-renewal, a sense of belonging, and self-awareness—that occur during travel. For example, a meal in a tourist restaurant may lack objective authenticity, yet it can be existentially authentic if it fosters unique, meaningful moments. This perspective highlights authenticity as a personal and situational phenomenon rather than an inherent property of objects or sites (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

### Evaluation

Together these approaches show that authenticity is not a single, fixed concept. It can be viewed as (a) a value eroded by mass tourism (Boorstin, 1964), (b) a socially constructed and staged commodity (MacCannell, 1973; 1976), or (c) a subjective, self-related experience (Ning, 1999). Contemporary research treats these perspectives as complementary, recognizing the multifaceted nature of authenticity in tourism.

## 2.2 Erik Cohen’s Tourist Typology and its Relationship with Authenticity

Cohen’s (1972) tourist typology provides a key framework for explaining how different tourists experience and value authenticity. He analyses the tension between the *quest for novelty* and the *need for familiarity*, identifying four primary tourist roles (later elaborated in Cohen, 1979):

- **Organized Mass Tourist:** Travels on package tours in an “environmental bubble” created by tour operators. Expectations of authenticity are low; satisfaction comes from representations arranged by the industry, aligning with MacCannell’s (1973) staged authenticity.
- **Individual Mass Tourist:** Uses package-tour logistics but partially individualizes the trip, seeking controlled novelty without abandoning comfort and security. Experiences are partly real but remain within the limits of staged authenticity.
- **Explorer:** Desires direct interaction with local people and everyday life while still relying on minimal tourist infrastructure. This type seeks a high level of authenticity and aligns with both MacCannell’s (1973) wish to access the back stage and Ning’s (1999) existential authenticity.
- **Drifter:** Avoids organized tourism entirely, aiming for full integration with the host community and the highest level of non-institutionalized authenticity—closest to Ning’s existential authenticity.

This typology demonstrates that the authenticity a tourist seeks is shaped not only by the destination but also by travel style and motivation (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Organized and individual mass tourists tend to be satisfied with staged authenticity, whereas explorers and drifters are more likely to pursue existential authenticity. Thus, Cohen’s framework bridges the objective and subjective dimensions of the touristic experience and provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the cases of Antalya and Gaziantep (Mkono, 2012).

### 2.3 Relationship Between Authenticity and Tourist Types

Perceptions of authenticity differ markedly across tourist segments. Organized and individual mass tourists typically value comfort, security and predictability. Consistent with [MacCannell's \(1973\)](#) concept of staged authenticity, they are content with pre-planned cultural performances offered by the tourism industry; for them authenticity is often accepted in a packaged and commercialized form where controlled and accessible experiences matter more than literal cultural reality ([Reisinger & Steiner, 2006](#), [Köksal, 2024](#)).

By contrast, explorers and drifters travel in a less structured and more discovery-oriented manner. For these tourists, authentic experiences require direct contact with local residents and participation in everyday practices that go beyond typical tourist settings. [Ning's \(1999\)](#) concept of existential authenticity captures this orientation: tourists experience authenticity primarily through the emotional renewal and identity construction that travel affords.

This distinction is central to the comparative analysis of Antalya and Gaziantep. Antalya's "all-inclusive" mass-tourism model embodies staged authenticity, appealing mainly to organized and individual mass tourists, whereas Gaziantep's gastronomy-focused tourism offers opportunities for existential authenticity and thus attracts explorers and drifters. Cohen's typology therefore remains a powerful explanatory framework for understanding how authenticity is negotiated in contemporary tourism ([Mkono, 2012](#); [Reisinger & Steiner, 2006](#)).

## 3. Methodology

This study is designed with a qualitative research design to comparatively examine the positions of the Antalya and Gaziantep destinations in the context of authenticity in tourism, within the framework of [Cohen's \(1972\)](#) tourist typology. The methodological approach is based on the logic of a qualitative comparative case study as proposed by [Yin \(2018\)](#). This design provides the opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences in the perception of authenticity in two destinations with distinct socio-cultural characteristics.

### 3.1 Research Design

A comparative case study approach has been adopted in this research ([Yin, 2018](#)). This approach allows for the systematic examination of two different contexts (Antalya and Gaziantep) within the same conceptual framework. Thus, the differentiation of authenticity perceptions among various tourist profiles within the scope of Cohen's tourist typology can be revealed across destinations.

### 3.2 Data Sources

This study did not collect primary field data; instead, it was conducted based on reliable secondary sources. The data sets used consist of the following elements:

- **Official statistics and policy reports:** Tourism statistics from the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, including data on visitor numbers and tourism infrastructure for Antalya and Gaziantep.
- **Academic articles and reports:** Peer-reviewed articles and conference proceedings published on authenticity in tourism and gastronomy tourism ([Karataş et al., 2023](#); [Kızılgöçü 2024](#); [Karsavuran & Dirlik, 2019](#); [Doldur, 2016](#); [Kodaş, 2018](#); [Kargiglioğlu & Akbaba, 2016](#)).
- **Institutional documents:** [UNESCO \(2015\)](#) Creative Cities Network reports and destination promotional materials.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The collected documents and secondary data were analyzed using the thematic content analysis method proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). This process included the following steps:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** Detailed reading of the relevant reports and articles.
2. **Coding:** Breaking down the texts into meaningful units based on Cohen's tourist typology and theories of authenticity.
3. **Theme development:** Classifying core concepts such as staged and existential authenticity, and the perceptions that differ according to tourist types, into themes.
4. **Comparative interpretation:** Evaluating the similarities and differences in the themes that emerged for Antalya and Gaziantep.

This methodological framework allows for a systematic examination of how perceptions of touristic authenticity in Antalya and Gaziantep are shaped within the context of Cohen's tourist typology.

## 4. Findings

This section describes the tourism structures and products of the Antalya and Gaziantep destinations, which form the basis of the study, with a focus on their presentation of authenticity.

### 4.1 Antalya as a Stage for Mass Tourism

Antalya, located on the Mediterranean, stands as the primary example of mass tourism in Türkiye. The city's tourism infrastructure is built upon "all-inclusive" holiday resorts and package tours, which present a contemporary example of the staged authenticity proposed by [MacCannell \(1973\)](#). This model offers tourists comfort and security within a safe and predictable environment, corresponding to the limited authenticity expectations of tourists who are in search of a controlled "exoticism". These standardized cultural shows and themed entertainment, consistent with MacCannell's concept, provide a response to the tourist's quest for an "authentic" experience within a safe framework. This approach allows Antalya to offer a "safe and accessible" authenticity on a mass tourism scale.

### 4.2 Gaziantep as a Center of Gastronomic and Cultural Authenticity

In contrast to Antalya's model, Gaziantep offers a participatory and identity-based touristic experience that aligns with [Ning's \(1999\)](#) concept of existential authenticity. This identity is centered on its membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network for its gastronomic heritage. The city's destination branding places its local culture at the center, presenting gastronomy as an element of "real" authenticity. The touristic experience in Gaziantep is characterized by opportunities for deep, personal, and participatory experiences, such as gastronomy workshops, visits to local markets, and direct interaction with the public. This model positions the destination as an example of "participatory authenticity waiting to be discovered".

### 4.3 Evaluation of Cohen's Typology in Light of Contemporary Tourism Trends

The findings indicate that [Cohen's \(1972\)](#) tourist typology maintains its explanatory power today. While organized and individual mass tourists are satisfied with staged authenticity in Antalya, explorers and drifters experience existential authenticity in Gaziantep. However, the impact of digitalization and social media is

transforming tourists' expectations of authenticity. For younger travelers in particular, experiential forms of tourism like gastronomy offer opportunities for a deeper connection with the destination. Meanwhile, virtual tourism applications and the culture of online sharing are both expanding and forcing a renegotiation of the perception of authenticity (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

## 5. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

In this section, the findings from the Antalya and Gaziantep cases are comparatively discussed within the framework of Cohen's (1972) tourist typology and theories of authenticity in tourism. The analysis examines how the perception of authenticity is shaped for different tourist types in both destinations and the impact of destination marketing strategies on these perceptions.

### 5.1 Differentiation of Authenticity Perception According to Tourist Types

Antalya and Gaziantep concretely illustrate the different roles in the quest for authenticity as described in Cohen's (1972) tourist typology. In Antalya, organized and individual mass tourists are satisfied with standardized cultural shows in "all-inclusive" holiday resorts where comfort and security are prioritized, consistent with MacCannell's (1973) concept of "staged authenticity". These experiences correspond to the limited authenticity expectations of tourists who are in search of a controlled "exoticism". In Gaziantep, on the other hand, explorers and drifters tend to experience the "existential authenticity" defined by Ning (1999). Gastronomy workshops, visits to local markets, and opportunities for direct interaction with the public allow tourists to become involved in daily life and connect with their own identities.

A deeper analysis reveals a fundamental difference in the *mode of engagement* for tourists in each destination. In Antalya, the tourist is positioned primarily as a spectator of a performance. The cultural experience is a product delivered to them in a passive consumption model—they watch a show, eat from a buffet, and observe a curated environment. This aligns perfectly with the mass tourist's desire to minimize risk and effort. In contrast, the tourist in Gaziantep is encouraged to become a participant and co-creator of their own experience. By engaging in a workshop or interacting with a local artisan, they are not merely consuming a finished product, but are actively involved in the process, which is central to the quest for existential authenticity (Ning, 1999).

Furthermore, this differentiation is closely linked to the concepts of predictability and risk. The "environmental bubble" (Cohen, 1972) in Antalya is a mechanism designed to eliminate unpredictability, offering a standardized and safe holiday. For the mass tourist, this lack of risk is a core component of the value proposition. For the explorer and drifter in Gaziantep, however, a degree of managed risk and unpredictability is integral to an authentic experience. The possibility of getting lost in an old market, having an unscripted conversation, or trying an unfamiliar dish is not a flaw in the system but a key feature of the authenticity they seek. Thus, while Antalya provides "safe and accessible authenticity," Gaziantep offers "participatory authenticity waiting to be discovered".

### 5.2 Authenticity Strategies in Destination Marketing

Antalya's marketing strategies are built upon the "all-inclusive" model that serves high-volume mass tourism. This model uses staged authenticity as a marketable product; folklore shows and themed entertainment provide a response to the tourist's quest for an "authentic" experience within a safe framework. Gaziantep, conversely, has placed its gastronomic heritage and local culture at the center of its destination branding. Its membership in the



UNESCO Creative Cities Network has enabled the city to present gastronomy as an element of "real" authenticity, making local cuisine and handicrafts a core component of its marketing messages. This strategy supports the expectations of explorer and drifter tourist types for in-depth and participatory experiences (Karataş et al., 2023).

This strategic divergence is also evident in the semiotics of their promotional materials. Antalya's marketing language often revolves around words like "paradise," "escape," "perfection," and "relaxation," accompanied by imagery of pristine blue pools, flawless beaches, and idealized family fun. This narrative sells a predictable and hermetically sealed fantasy, reinforcing the security of the "environmental bubble." Gaziantep's marketing, in contrast, employs a vocabulary of "journey," "discovery," "heritage," "taste," and "tradition." Its imagery is filled with the dynamic chaos of a bustling bazaar, the hands of a craftsman at work, and the steam rising from a freshly cooked local dish. This narrative sells not a perfect escape, but an imperfect and therefore more "authentic" immersion into a living culture, appealing directly to the explorer's desire for an unscripted experience (Albuz, 2019; Suna & Alvarez, 2019; Gültekin, 2011).

### 5.3 Evaluation of Cohen's Typology in Light of Contemporary Tourism Trends

The findings indicate that Cohen's (1972) tourist typology maintains its explanatory power today. While organized and individual mass tourists are satisfied with staged authenticity in Antalya, explorers and drifters experience existential authenticity in Gaziantep. However, the impact of digitalization and social media is transforming tourists' expectations of authenticity. For younger travelers in particular, experiential forms of tourism such as gastronomy offer opportunities for a deeper connection with the destination. Meanwhile, virtual tourism applications and the culture of online sharing are both expanding and forcing a renegotiation of the perception of authenticity.

Recent studies further demonstrate that digital and virtual technologies are reshaping tourists' perceptions of authenticity, as virtual reality experiences can evoke a sense of presence and influence how "real" a destination feels (Tussyadiah & Wang, 2018; Beck et al., 2019). These developments resonate with Ning's (1999) idea of existential authenticity, as the tourist's feeling of self-realisation and identity construction may now emerge within technologically mediated environments. For Cohen's typology, this trend suggests that explorers and even drifters may partially satisfy their quest for novelty and "back stage" experiences through virtual means, while organised mass tourists can access curated forms of staged authenticity online. Consequently, the digital turn extends the spectrum of how authenticity is negotiated in contemporary tourism.

One of the most significant transformations within this digital context is the rise of the "hybrid tourist," who fluidly moves between Cohen's categories of tourist typologies (Cohen, 1972). A tourist on an all-inclusive package in Antalya—traditionally classified as an Organized Mass Tourist—might use a travel blog or Instagram to locate an "authentic" local restaurant for one evening, momentarily adopting the role of an Explorer. Conversely, an Explorer in Gaziantep might still prioritize a hotel with high-speed Wi-Fi and modern comforts, blending the quest for novelty with the need for familiarity (Ning, 1999; Huimin & Yan, 2022). This suggests that while Cohen's roles still provide a useful framework, modern tourists are increasingly curating their own unique blend of staged and existential authenticity on a day-by-day basis (Christou et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the culture of online sharing adds a new dimension to the quest for authenticity itself. For many contemporary tourists—especially digital natives like Generation Z—the value of an "authentic" experience, such as participating in a cooking workshop in Gaziantep, is not derived solely from internal satisfaction or existential

authenticity (Ning, 1999), but also from its potential as social capital. The experience becomes a performance, not only for the self but also for an online audience, creating a new form of staged authenticity in which the tourist is effectively their own director (Weiming & Iahad, 2025). This performative aspect challenges the traditional boundaries of Cohen's typology, suggesting that the modern tourist's quest is often for a "visibly authentic" experience—one that is emotionally resonant, digitally shareable, and shaped by generational preferences for online visibility and peer validation (Ivancsóné Horváth et al., 2025).

## 6. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study has examined how the quests for authenticity in tourism are shaped in the destinations of Antalya and Gaziantep through a comparative case analysis within the framework of Cohen's (1972) tourist typology. The findings reveal how staged and existential authenticity carry different meanings for different tourist types and how this diversity can be utilized in the marketing strategies of destinations.

### 6.1 Summary of the Research's Main Findings

- **Antalya:** Organized and individual mass tourists are satisfied with the standardized cultural performances consistent with MacCannell's (1973) concept of "staged authenticity" in the safe and predictable environment provided by "all-inclusive" holiday resorts. Antalya offers a "safe and accessible" authenticity on a mass tourism scale.
- **Gaziantep:** Its membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and its rich gastronomic heritage enable explorers and drifters to have deep, participatory, and personal experiences in line with Ning's (1999) concept of "existential authenticity". This destination is a prime example of "participatory authenticity waiting to be discovered".

These findings demonstrate that Cohen's typology remains explanatory in contemporary tourism and that tourists' quest for authenticity varies depending on both the experiences offered by the destination and individual motivations.

### 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the debates on authenticity in the sociology of tourism in two ways:

- It has empirically shown how the concepts of staged and existential authenticity can emerge simultaneously in different touristic contexts (mass tourism and gastronomy tourism).
- By testing Cohen's tourist typology in the context of current tourism trends (gastronomy-focused experiential tourism, cultural participation), it has revealed that the typology still possesses strong explanatory power.

### 6.3 Practical and Policy Recommendations

- **Segmentation-based authenticity strategies for Destination Management Organizations:** For mass tourism centers like Antalya, it is recommended to improve staged authenticity with an emphasis on



quality and safety. For experiential tourism centers like Gaziantep, developing workshops, gastronomy routes, and local market experiences that enhance active tourist participation is advisable.

- **Sustainable tourism and the preservation of local culture:** The case of Gaziantep shows that preserving local cuisine and cultural heritage and turning them into tourism products is a significant path toward economic and cultural sustainability. In Antalya, it is important to organize staged authenticity elements in a way that ensures fairer revenue sharing with local communities.

#### 6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

In-depth studies can be conducted on how digital tourism experiences (virtual tours, augmented reality applications) are transforming the perception of authenticity. Comparative analyses of gastronomy tourism and mass tourism destinations in different geographical locations could test the cross-cultural validity of Cohen's typology. The impact of tourists' social media usage and online sharing practices on their perceptions of staged and existential authenticity could be examined.

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#### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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