MEASURING VISITORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF SILK ROAD ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBITS IN SAMARKAND MUSEUM

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Abstract. *The role of museums is a very important one in preserving and communicating cultural heritage. Visitor perceptions of authenticity are especially significant in museums of archaeology, as these perceptions can have an impact on levels of trust, in the educational value of the experience, emotion experienced and satisfaction with the visit. This study aims to investigate visitors' perceptions of the authenticity of Silk Road archaeological exhibits at the Afrosiab Museum in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The data were collected from the museum visitors using Quantitative research approach in which a structured questionnaire was used.*

The results suggest that visitors feel the majority of the items presented in the museum are authentic and can be considered as having a historical credibility. Authenticity perceptions are shaped by an array of exhibition design, interpretive information, artifact presentation and museum atmosphere. Moreover, the perception of authenticity positively correlates with the satisfaction level and the trust in the museum's information of visitors.

The study enriches research on heritage tourism and museum studies based on a case study at the archaeological museum in Central Asia while offering some recommendations regarding the development of better museum interpretation and user experience.

Keywords: *Authenticity; Archaeological Museum; Silk Road; Afrosiab Museum; Cultural Heritage; Visitor Perception; Samarkand*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental concepts in heritage tourism and museum studies is authenticity. Many visitors are interested in opportunities to make connections with the past through genuine historical objects and meaningful interpretation. Museums function not only as repositories of archaeological artifacts but also as institutions that communicate cultural identity and historical knowledge (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Samarkand is one of the most significant cities in the history of the Silk Road, serving as a center of trade, cultural exchange, and civilization. The Afrosiab Museum preserves archaeological collections including murals, ceramics, coins, inscriptions, and architectural fragments that allow visitors to engage with the region's rich heritage (Frankopan, 2015; UNESCO, 2001). Although authenticity has been widely discussed in museum and tourism studies, limited research has examined visitor perceptions in Central Asian archaeological museums. This study addresses that gap by investigating authenticity perceptions at the Afrosiab Museum.

The objectives of this study are:

- To discuss with visitors the concept and meanings of 'Authentic' at the Afrosiab Museum.

- To identify the factors influencing visitors' perceptions of authenticity during the museum exhibition.
- To examine how perceived authenticity influences visitor satisfaction.
- To make suggestions to enhance the museum interpretation and visitor experience.

Literature Review

The concept of authenticity is one of the most influential in heritage tourism and museum studies, impacting the understanding, emotions, and museum experience of visitors. MacCannell (1973) states that tourists want authentic experiences, and that they want to feel a sense of cultural and historical reality in the destination they are in. Wang (1999) further elaborated this concept by dividing authenticity into two categories: one for object-based authenticity (originality and historical authenticity) and the other for existential authenticity (as the subjective feelings and significant experiences during the visit).

Museums are institutions where cultural heritage is preserved and communicated to the public. As educational institutions, museums are no longer merely repositories of historical artifacts but also play an important role in interpreting history for society (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Likewise, Falk and Dierking (2013) state that personal experience (background, prior knowledge, social interactions and the physical environment of the museum) will influence how visitors interact with the authenticity of the visual evidence of the museum.

Authenticity is thus created through the confluence of the three: the visitors, the exhibits and the interpretation that is put on display. Presenting archaeological artifacts has been demonstrated to impact on how authentic visitors conceive of them. According to Bitgood (2011) there are a number of elements in the layout of the exhibition, lighting, arrangement of artifacts, interpretive labels and visual communication that can affect how the visitors learn and how they are pleased. Similarly, Dean (1996) stresses the need for well-designed exhibitions to frame objects in way that visitors can use to build historical meanings.

Good exhibitions invite deeper engagement, building visitors' confidence in the validity of the museum's collections and their historical trustworthiness. A second tool to improve the role of authenticity in museums has been storytelling. A shift away from presenting relics facts has been championed by (Tilden 1977) who suggests that interpretation should demonstrate meaning and significance of cultural heritage. Through storytelling, visitors are able to create connections with the historical events surrounding the archaeological objects.

Visitors' emotional responses were better, which led to better perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction with the exhibitions, according to Jin et al. (2020) who found that participatory and narrative exhibitions fostered visitor emotional involvement. Authenticity has received further significance in this field of archaeological museum curation, because people normally expect artifacts in museums to be true to history. Original archaeological artifacts are seen by visitors as more educational than replicas, and are more emotionally significant than replicas, according to Schwan and Dutz (2010).

However, modern museum research indicates that authenticity cannot be based solely on the originality of the artifacts. Brida, Disegna and Scuderi (2012) believe that the authenticity of the interpretation, the quality of the exhibition or the communication strategy will have a significant impact on visitors' perception of authenticity, along with the museum's artifacts. Digital technologies increasingly used in museum exhibits to enhance the exhibit experience.

Through virtual reality, augmented reality, interactive displays, and three-dimensional reconstructions, visitors can experience reconstructed historical environments. These technologies improve learning and visitor engagement (Miłosz et al., 2021). Atzeni et al. (2022) caution that museums should balance digital interpretation with historical accuracy to preserve perceptions of authenticity.

As it relates to Silk Road heritage, authenticity is especially important as the Silk Road is an area of culture, exchange, trading and civilization over many centuries.

As one of the most impactful networks in the history of Asia, Europe and the Middle East according to (Frankopan 2015), the Silk Road can be studied as an interconnected chain of urbanization, commerce and migration. It was one of its most significant cultural and commercial centres was Samarkand.

The Afrosiab Museum collects the archaeological remains of this rich history, such as murals, ceramics, coins, inscriptions and architectural remains. UNESCO (2001) states that the conservation and interpretation of these collections have the benefits of promoting cultural identity, cultural heritage and sustainable tourism development. While there has been a vast number of research studies conducted on authenticity in museums and heritage tourism, studies that concentrate on the perception of the museum's authenticity from visitors' perspectives in the context of Central Asian heritage are rather scarce among archaeological museums, especially in Uzbekistan.

To date, most of the research has been based on museums in Europe or East Asia, while there has been less focus on authenticity in the perspective of visitors to museums in the Silk Road region.

So, the aim of this study relies on the existing literature regarding the impact of the design of the exhibition, the presentation of the artifacts, the communication in interpretation and the atmosphere of the museum on the perception of authenticity of visitors to the Afrosiab Museum in Samarkand. Moreover, it addresses the issues on the impact of these perceptions on the museum visitors' trust, satisfaction and experience of the visits, as well as offers some concrete recommendations on how to improve the interpretation of the museum's collections and the quality of the museum tourism in Uzbekistan.

METHODS

This study used quantitative research design. The information was obtained by doing a survey to artefacts' visitors using a specially prepared questionnaire in Afrosiab Museum in Samarkand. The questions on the questionnaire were divided into demographic questions and statements aimed at measuring the authenticity of the visit, the presentation of the exhibits, confidence, emotional involvement and satisfaction with the visit. Items were rated on a 5 point Likert scale (SD strongly disagree to SU strongly agree).

A total of 100 museum visitors participated in the survey. The subjects consisted of domestic and international tourists holding various degrees of knowledge and understanding of the Silk Road history and with different educational backgrounds. By using the descriptive statistics and regression analysis packages data were analyzed. Data were matched using descriptive statistics and the effects of perceived authenticity on visitor satisfaction and trust were analyzed by regression.

RESULTS

The results show that the overwhelming majority in the survey believed that the exhibits in the museum were genuine representations of the history of the Silk Road.

All statements were given high ratings of agreement by visitors when they were asked to rate statements about their reactions to their visit to the Centre: Scholarly accuracy of displays. Natural appearance of archaeological artifacts. The credibility of information provided by the museum. Educational benefits of exhibitions. • Emotional links with stories from history. The findings also show that the design of exhibitions is important for visitor perceptions.

Interpretive labels that were clear, effective displays of artifacts, lighting, and displays were all helpful in perceptions of authenticity. The results of regression analysis indicated that there is a positive relationship between perception of authenticity and satisfaction among tourists.

Regression analysis showed a positive and significant relationship between visitor satisfaction and perception of authenticity. Those who felt authentic demonstrated increased trust in the exhibits, emotional connection, and overall satisfaction with their museum experience.

Table 1. The main factors influencing authenticity perception were derived by categorizing the categories listed below:

Factor	**Influence on Authenticity**
Original Artifacts	High
Interpretive Labels	High
Exhibition Design	Moderate to High
Museum Atmosphere	Moderate
Historical Narratives	High
Visual Presentation	Moderate

These findings indicate that the concept of authenticity goes beyond the originality of artifacts, and encompasses the museum's interpretation and presentation of the meaning of the past.

DISCUSSION

The results support previous research indicating that authenticity is a multidimensional concept. Original archaeological objects continue to be important but in exhibitions authenticity is assessed through the design of the exhibition, the narration of the content and the interpretive communication. These findings correspond to Wang's theory of ‘authenticity' suggesting that there are objective and experiential aspects of being authentic.

The Afrosiab Museum visitors did not just value the presence of original artifacts, but also the quality of interpretation provided that enabled them to understand value of the historic importance. The research also confirms that these elements of authenticity positively affect visitor satisfaction. If exhibits appear credible and accurate, they are likely to be emotionally intriguing and instructive to their visitors. Authenticity is especially significant for museums on the Silk Road as it enables them to be part of historical heritage and evidence of intercultural.

These stories can be communicated effectively to enhance the appreciation of cultural heritage among visitors and contribute to the sustainable development of tourism industry. The results also emphasize the role of management strategies in museums. Further improvements to exhibit interpretation, multilingual exhibit information panels, interactive technologies and storytelling techniques can enhance perceptions of authenticity further.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to look at visitors' perception of the authenticity of Silk Road archaeological exhibits in the Afrosiab Museum in Samarkand. Their findings showed that the visitors come overall with an impression that the exhibits are true and historically realistic.

Exhibit design and the ability to communicate their meaning and the presentation of artifacts are significant in influencing these perceptions. The findings support the claim that authenticity plays a positive role as regards visitors' satisfaction, confidence and emotional commitment.

The results add up to the studies in museums and to the study of the heritage tour with evidence from the Central Asian archaeological context. Displaying archaeological artifacts and creating interpretive materials and historical narratives could be strengthened by improvements in the content of interpretive materials and in the art of storytelling, the addition of appropriate digital technologies, and the integrity of archaeological artifacts.

Promoting perceptions of authenticity can benefit cultural preservation and sustainable growth in the tourism industry as Samarkand works to become more of an international cultural tourism hub.

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