

Paradoxes of Authenticity in Liminal Consumption: The Case of Casablanca's Rick's Café

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Abstract

What makes a 'fake' seemingly 'authentic'? The case of Rick's Café, known worldwide for the movie *Casablanca*, situates that question. Rick's was a set constructed on a Hollywood sound stage. Another Rick's was created *materially* in Casablanca decades later. Consumers are aware of this liminal condition. It is the reflexivity inherent in this awareness of performative inauthenticity that makes the case both appropriate and nuanced as an opportunity to explore paradoxes of authenticity embodied in a tourist place. The authenticity-fakery relationship is considered theoretically, not as a dualism (*either-or*), but as a duality (*both-and*). Empirically, the case is analyzed through an onsite investigation and a virtual ethnography. Four paradoxical dimensions of authenticity (liminal environment, liminal interpretation, liminal affectivity, liminal recreation) are identified. Tourists, we submit, may experience several *authenticities* (i.e., objective, constructed and existential) simultaneously and paradoxically, contributing to a reconceptualization of the tourist experience.

Keywords: authenticity, paradox theory, liminality, fake authentic, authentic of marketing

“I know the history (...) but still I prefer to believe this is the real place.”

Sladjana Prica, Serbian ambassador to Morocco, reported in Nordland (2018a, p. A23).

Introduction

The concept of authenticity in tourist motivations and experiences was introduced by MacCannel (1973). Subsequently, authenticity has formed a part of the tourism research agenda, with the concept of authenticity assuming “a dominant role in tourism practice” (Moore et al., 2021, p. 1; see also Rickly, 2022, Wang, 1999, and Zhou et al., 2023). Studies have explored, e.g., the co-creation of touristic experience (e.g., Loureiro & Sarmiento, 2019; Szmigin, et al. 2017), the experiential dimensions of authenticity in tourists’ self-identity (e.g., Brown, 2013; Spracklen et al., 2013), and the intrapersonal dimensions of authenticity in wellness tourism (e.g., Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Overall, authenticity discourses have found their way into nearly every corner of tourism research, and research interest in authenticity in tourism has grown exponentially, especially in the last decade (Rickly, 2022).

Despite those developments, the conceptualization of authenticity is still a “work in progress”. Moore et al. (2021, p. 1) observed that while “the concept of authenticity seems unavoidable and important in practice (...) its theoretical status remains unclear”. Moreover, as those authors also note, while acknowledging multiple approaches to authenticity, researchers have focused on one or other of several types, or categories, of authenticity (Wang, 1999). These types are objective/materialist (i.e., authenticity of originals), constructed/symbolic (i.e., authenticity projected onto toured objects and places by tourists or tourism producers), and existential authenticity, which refers “to a state of Being, rather than an essentialist, objective quality” (Ricky-Boid, 2013, p. 680). Describing authenticity as a possible ‘existential’ phenomenon represented an important contribution for (re)conceptualizing authenticity, in that only a limited range of tourist experiences can be

explained by either objective or constructive authenticity (Wang, 1999), and existential authenticity can explain a greater variety of tourist experiences, especially in terms of postmodern existence, a key element in the sociology of tourism (Apostolopoulos et al, 2013).

Mirroring such reconceptualization as an observation (i.e., that tourist experiences are much more than an *objective* or a *constructive* phenomenon, they are also *existential*), studies have explored existential authenticity from both a theoretical (e.g., Brown, 2013; Rickly et al., 2021; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) and empirical perspective (e.g., Kim & Jamal, 2007; Kirillova et al., 2017; Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021; see an overview of quantitative studies on Zhou et al., 2023). Nonetheless, those studies have missed, or at least underestimated, the relevance of two important interrelated aspects of the experiences of authenticity. First, some tourist experiences embrace objective, constructive/symbolic, and the existential *authenticities* simultaneously (Moore et al., 2021), accepting that the boundaries between those experienced categories are blurred. Second, through their practices, tourists also *build* and *shape* authenticity – which is paradoxical in that, from an *objective* perspective, authenticity either exists or doesn't exist in the places visited or the goods consumed. The case explored in this paper – Rick's Café as *represented* in the movie *Casablanca* and Rick's Café as *materialized* in *Casablanca*, the real place – epitomizes that phenomenon. The notion of “performative authenticity”, in which “the interconnection and dynamism between the field [objectivity] and habitus [subjectivity], and the blurred boundaries between purposive and unreflexive individual practice” (Zhu, 2012, p. 1500; also see Knudsen & Waade, 2010) partially explores simultaneity. However, it does not embrace or explore the paradoxes experienced by the performers (see Moore et al., 2021).

We use a paradox theory lens to explore the case of Rick's Café and theorize tourist experiences of paradoxical authenticity. We structure the paper as follows. We start by describing the liminal context (i.e., *Casablanca*, the movie, and Rick's Café as represented

there and *materialized* in Casablanca) in which performative authenticity is explored paradoxically. Both the liminal and the materialized context, as well as the relation between them, represent our research setting, which we discuss to make theory elaboration more vivid and substantiated. We elaborate theory based on the authenticity-fakery relationship but do so not as a dualism (*either-or*) but as a duality (*both-and*). Empirically, we use an inductive methodology largely premised on a virtual ethnographic study of consumers' expressed perceptions of their experience at Rick's Café. We highlight four interrelated main dimensions in our findings that constitute authenticity as a paradox: *liminal environment, liminal interpretation, liminal affectivity, and liminal recreation*. In the discussion, we advance four topics that address how the paradoxes of authenticity are posited in the consumer's liminal experience. We conclude with some final notes on the paradoxical perspective of authenticity in liminality.

Casablanca and its Essence: Rick's Café

The Film

Casablanca is one of the most iconic movies of all time (Woodhouse, 2013), winner of three Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Oscars, as is well known, are gold statuettes awarded annually in the US by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for various outstanding achievements in the field of Motion Pictures. For cinephiles, the essence of *Casablanca* is Rick's, in which nearly all the movie is situated. The film tells the story of Rick Blaine, an American who lives and works in Casablanca during the Second World War when Casablanca was a French protectorate that had fallen to the Nazis. Rick runs the fashionable Rick's Café, a haunt frequented by the local Vichy French administrative class but also by the local resistance, as well as Nazis, fugitives, refugees, and criminals. Ilsa Lund, Rick's love from a past affair in Paris, reappears in his bar alongside her husband, Victor Laszlo, a hero of the Czech resistance. The café is a meeting point, a liminal

place between the Nazi occupation and the French resistance, as well as a place of shelter for those being hunted by the regime but seeking to find a passage to freedom. In this in-between space, a space outside the external conflict, a space offering an escape route from Axis to Allied territory, the ex-lovers meet again.

The liminal environment of Rick's Café creates a context imbued with romanticism and multiculturalism, repression and resistance, as well as desperation and hope, in a real political and historical period. Without all these historical, romantic, and narrative facets, the story of Rick's Café would be non-existent. The film created an aura of exoticism and sophistication around the city that gave its name to the motion picture: Casablanca, in Morocco. For many years after the war, most cinephiles knew of Casablanca only what the film showed, in the days before mass tourism. Casablanca, from a non-indigenous perspective was, in the postwar years, largely the preserve of artists and, in their wake, those that became part of the hippy trail. It was not until mass tourism grew with the explosion of budget airlines after the EU deregulation of airline markets in 1997 that tourists flocked to Casablanca. Of course, knowing *Casablanca*, tourists familiar with the film wanted to visit the most iconic place: Rick's Café. The problem was that there never had been a Rick's Café in Casablanca.

Rick's Café: Making a Fake Authentic

Kathy Kriger (1946–2018) reportedly first saw *Casablanca* at a movie festival in her hometown of Portland, Oregon, in the year 1974. In 1998, she was posted to Morocco through her job at the State Department, where she was surprised to find no Rick's Café existed. It was during the somber and reflective period following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the USA that she initially began to remedy this absence (Kriger, 2012). By responding to an obvious business opportunity, she decided to *materialize* the *socially constructed reality* of Rick's Café (Nordland, 2018a, 2018b), linking Hollywood fantasy to the real life of a place of business. Inspired by the famous cinematic gin joint, she created a real Rick's Café in a 1930s

Moroccan mansion whose central courtyard was built against the walls of the old Medina of Casablanca. Securing the support of investors, she opened Rick's Café in 2004 (Goodman, 2004; Kriger, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004). The site was plucked from the souk's alleyways, the Marché Central's crowded food stalls and the world of Moroccan business. Two palm trees flank Rick's entrance door, with the layout of the site allowing for three façades: a distinctive entrance facing the street with heavy French doors in wood that portray those of the film; a harbor-facing façade looking out over the Atlantic; as well as a narrow cul-de-sac which was the former main entrance but is now the service entrance.

The marketing strategy materialized imaginations into (a simulacrum of) Rick's Café in the movie. Kriger (2012) later published a book on the strategy, *Rick's Café: Bringing the film legend to life in Casablanca*. Part of the strategy, she said, was to make the place a source of existential authenticity: "Opening a Rick's Café might remind Americans of the values we exhibited during World War II: sacrifice for the greater good, sympathy for the underdog, the willingness to take a stand" (Kriger, 2012, p. 8). Rick's, from the outset, was a *fake* place made *real* by the inclusion of tile and woodwork drawn from Morocco's traditional craft industry. The environment *created* allowed anyone that had seen the movie to step back in time, escape into another world and enjoy the familiar place for themselves in an 'authentic' context. No attention to detail was spared, right down to the beaded lamps and grand piano hidden in an archway. American architect and interior designer, Bill Willis, conceived the decorative and architectural details reminiscent of the film: curved arches, a sculpted bar, balconies, balustrades, as well as beaded and stenciled brass lighting and plants that cast luminous shadows on white walls. Fireplaces are carved marble or painted *tadelakt* with intricate *zellij* tile patterns accenting the fireplaces and the risers of the central stairway. *Tadelakt* in muted colors covers walls throughout the restaurant, while the floors are set in handmade terra cotta tile.

The purpose of making the fake an *authentic environment* was so clear that, when Kathy Kriger was interviewing Moroccan candidates for a manager, she met Issam Chabaa, who told her he could play piano: “I asked him to show me, and he sat down and played ‘As time goes by’ (...). He was hired” (In Nordland 2018b, p. A4). He played it on an authentic 1930s Pleyel piano and ‘As Time Goes By’ is a common request for him as the in-house pianist. When customers ask the manager/pianist, “Play it again, Sam”, he corrects them by saying, “My name is Issam” (in Nordland 2018a, p. A23). Table 1 chronologically presents the facts from the idealization to the implementation of Rick’s Café, as evidenced by Kriger’s trajectory as an entrepreneur.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Theory Elaboration

We use the Rick’s Café case to explore the relationship between the authenticity of the temporary stage set and the fakery of its realization as a materialization 60 years later. The relationship between authenticity and fakery, that which is momentarily temporary and that whose material presence seems to point to an enduring reality, is often approached as a binary opposition in which the authentic is superior to the fake, the enduring more worthy than the temporary, of which each is the antithesis of the other. Earlier literature on authenticity in tourism, at least implicitly, followed this reasoning (Moore et al., 2021; Wang, 1999/2007). However, approaching the authenticity-fakery/temporary-enduring relationship as a dualism (either-or) leads to simplistic approaches to the complexity of the real, especially in relation to *real consumers’* organizational experiences of the dualism.

The concept of paradox is helpful to explain the intertwinement of opposites, the interpenetration of opposite elements. When both original and fake are made from the same material and have the same design, number of stitches, and quality materials (Wang, 2023) what distinguishes the real from the fake? Between the museum-like purity of the authentic

conceived of as the real and the postmodern view of the authentic as residing in the experiences of different phenomena at different times, the plasticity of authenticity accommodates multiple meanings. In such multiplicity, as the reified distinction between authentic and fake is deconstructed into ‘versions’ that (sometimes) play with a difference, other times wholly obscuring its signs, artificiality, ambivalence, and simulacrum can all be attractive.

In paradox theory (Berti et al., 2021; Schad et al., 2016), it is possible for a phenomenon to be *both-and* (fake *and* authentic) rather than assuming that duality should be decided by using an *either-or* approach, in which one element (fake *or* authentic) prevails. If a phenomenon can be both fake and authentic, then authenticity must be approached as nuanced and complex. First, experiences of authenticity do not require a material or *objective* authenticity credited by professionals and experts, i.e., ‘cool authentication’ (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Second, authenticity may be socially constructed and emerge from ‘hot authentication’ that results “from the continued performative and usually emotionally charged practices of many people, including tourists” (Moore et al., 2021, p. 3). Third, tourists may perform, at both the inter-personal and intra-personal levels, an existential authenticity, “a potential state of Being that is to be activated by tourist activities” (Wang, 1999, p. 352). Yet, despite these developments, authenticity experiences in which boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ blur, have a paradoxicality that has not been explored. Rick’s Café offers a doubly paradoxical case with unique opportunities to explore the complex relationship between the imagined and the real (Lipovetsky, 2021) from a tourist perspective. Considering paradox as a persistent opposition between interdependent elements (Gaim et al., 2022; Schad et al., 2016) problematizes the notion of place, as Massey (1994) elaborates:

If ... the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then *one view of a place is as a particular appreciation of*

those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings ... But the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself.

Importantly, it includes relations which stretch beyond the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. *The identities of places are always unfixed, contested and multiple.* (p. 5, our emphasis)

If the place is a ‘particular appreciation’, a ‘particular moment’ in ‘networks of social relations and understandings’, ‘relations’, ‘unfixed, contested and multiple’, then reality is a signifier that floats in representations, material and ideational, captured in celluloid, DVD, memory, text, as well as fakery and homage. Place image plays a crucial role in tourism in which the tourist is the buyer, with the destination being the product (Elliot & Papadopoulos, 2016; Han, 1989). To be successful, a destination needs to possess an identity or brand image that sums up the essence of a place for potential visitors (Hosany et al., 2006; Qu et al., 2011). Crafted homage can work as well as the remnants of history.

The notion of the hyper-real (Baudrillard, 1983; Eco, 1986a) suggests that much of the contemporary world consists of versions of an imagined reality, creating a world lacking reference to anything other than itself, a flat world, a world without history, a world of eternal repetitions, a world like Disneyland. For Baudrillard, places such as Dubai, Miami, and Las Vegas reflect a *creatio ex nihilo*, places created out of nothing organically evolved from place-based histories. Eco called the hyper-real “the authentic fake” (Eco, 1986b, p. 2). Rose and Wood (2005) advanced Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality to ‘hyperauthenticity’, which denotes “viewers’ reflexive consumption of an individualized blend of fantasy with the real” (p. 294). We advance a hyper-authenticity perspective by revealing how consumers actively assume authenticity in the paradoxical relationship between the real image and the fake reality

while performing an original experience in the recreated context. The case of Ricks' Café is revelatory. Having discussed earlier the main features of our liminal research setting (see Table 1 for understanding chronologically the facts from the idealization to the implementation of Rick's Café), we next discuss the procedures adopted to collect and analyze the data.

Method

Online ethnographic study (Skågeby, 2011), also recognized as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008), was carried out from February to July 2023, covering the 2004-2023 period, through social media (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) as well as websites (e.g., rickscafe.ma, tripadvisor.com, trip.com, fr.restaurantguru.com, and monnuage.fr) and videos (e.g., YouTube). Hine (2008, p. 65) explains that virtual ethnography is “ethnography in, of and through the virtual”. Our focus was on the voice of consumers whose views were made freely available as naturally occurring data. Through these sources (additional details below), we were able to constitute an interpretative analysis of multiple consumers' perceptions of a singular consumption experience. We supplemented virtual ethnography with an onsite investigation at Rick's Café, with five unstructured interviews (with the general manager and four employees) conducted in April 2023 to capture employees' and the general manager's interpretations regarding the liminal experience. These interviews sought to record examples of conveyed/perceived consumer experiences. Non-participant observation was also complemented to data collection by observing the operation of the place and the consumer experience.

Data were also collected from virtual publications: (i) local public access websites containing consumers' comments about “Rick's Café, Casablanca”; (ii) selected international websites containing comments, expressions, criticisms and perceptions from different nationalities, cultures, and languages about Rick's Café; (iii) as well as travel websites, in

addition to the official website of the restaurant. We considered public information published on the restaurant's official social media, such as Instagram (@rickscafe_casablanca), Facebook (Rick's Café Casablanca) and YouTube, selecting the content that expresses the experience in the Café compared to the expectation based on the film. Official information from the book (Kriger, 2012) was also used to make sense of the history of the restaurant, as well as data drawn from an interview published with the owner shortly before her death on July 26, 2018 (Nordland, 2018a, 2018b). We adopted a descriptive narrative technique (Pentland, 1999), immersing the reader in a story evoking a vivid representation of characters, settings, and events. Table 2 presents our data sources.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Twenty-one different languages are represented in quotes and expressions about Rick's Café analyzed in this study. Considering the languages and the number of comments recorded, the tally is as follows: English (2,210); French (1,496); Spanish (202); Chinese (190); Portuguese (146); Italian (120); German (81); Turkish (39); Russian (25); Dutch (19); Japanese (18); Swedish (11); Arabic (7); Greek (6); Korean (5); Norwegian (4); Danish (3); Czech (2); Hebrew (2); and Hungarian (2), totaling 4,588 quotes. The quotes represent the consumer's voice and consumption experience. All non-English quotes were translated into English, using machine translation made available by the tourism websites, with the identity of the consumers kept anonymous.

Analytical Procedure

We adopted interpretive research (Goia, 2021; Spiggle, 1994) to ground consumer interpretations of the structures and processes that they used to socially construct the meaning of their experience in liminal consumption. Inductive analysis created categories that emerged from the terms employed by consumers in the environment experienced (Brewer, 2005; Gioia,

2021; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). The analytical process, the results of which are represented in Figure 1, was composed of three stages, following the Gioia template (Gioia et al., 2013).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In the *first stage*, we reviewed the raw data to identify key concepts. We codified fragments (Saldaña, 2013) of relevant texts or quotations (Eldh et al., 2020) that were observed, said, or read about the authenticity of liminal experiences between the material and the ideational Rick's Café. Narrative (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) and document analysis techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2017) supported the coding process. The quotes were first analyzed and classified by the first author. Then, two other authors independently reviewed that categorization to provide accuracy. In the next stage, disagreements were discussed among the coauthors until an agreement was reached. Thirty-nine classified codes (i.e., first-order concepts) were established as emerging from the data. The quotes were listed in a table, mentioning the source, nationality (if any), date and year of publication. Each quotation was analyzed and manually coded by using the subject of the phenomenon under analysis. Subsequently, data with the same code were compiled, with 39 codes emerging from 4,588 direct quotes, representing an index of 117.64-quotations per code, meaning the average number of "passages reproduced or repeated" per code (Eldh et al., 2020, p. 1), bringing content to life (White et al., 2014) and ensuring the robustness of the results (Spiers et al., 2018).

In the *second stage*, arising from the aggregation of the first-order concepts (expression of the consumer's voice), we identified second-order themes, of which there were ten. Second-order themes aggregated the information from informants in a more compact way. Illustratively, a theme such as 'ambivalence' aggregated concepts relative to physical space *and* its fictional meaning, recognition of the actual site' idealized elements. In other words, second-order themes aggregate the direct views of informants in a more compact and

abstractly conceptualized way. Second-order themes underlay the main categories that emerged to order consumer expressions. The first-order data (informant-centered) and second-order (theory-centered) themes followed the methodological rigor of interpretive research, which articulates concepts and their interrelationships to explain the phenomena under analysis (Corley & Gioia, 2011). We sought emerging concepts at the second-order level of analysis, particularly nascent concepts that have not been adequately covered in the literature or existing concepts that stood out for their relevance to a new domain (Gioia et al., 2010).

In the *third stage*, the second-order themes were grouped into four higher-level constructs, or aggregate categories, that captured the essence of the findings at a higher level of abstraction. These categories were: (i) *liminal environment* incorporates themes relative to the space itself; (ii) *liminal interpretation* articulates aspects related to sensemaking and ambivalence involved in the process; (iii) *liminal affectivity* refers to memories evoked, and (iv) *liminal recreation* denotes the actual experience of being in the place. These four high-level categories combine to emerge what are termed “paradoxes of authenticity”. In the next section, we discuss the results according to these four higher-order categories.

Findings

Liminal Environment

The first higher-order category, liminal environment, emerged from grouping four second-order themes. It refers to categories related to the creation of a liminal ambience, i.e., a space between reality and fantasy constituted through: (i) *marketing strategy*, (ii) *authentic expectation*, (iii) *faking reality*, and (iv) *gatekeepers’ influence*.

Marketing Strategy

In a marketing strategy, before launching the venture, Kriger’s pitch was that the business already had prospective consumer demand, focused on the absence of a ‘local’ experience that related to the cinephile experience of *Casablanca*, which for many tourists,

she assumed, would provide the major emotive connection with the city as a place (Kriger, 2012). Clearly, the strategy was aimed not at a local market, largely composed of people whose view of place was not constituted by a film that they had never seen, for whom the film was less relevant than for the many visitors for whom Casablanca had a romantic, exotic charm, a place with which they were familiar because of a film that had been made a lifetime ago. The challenge was to construct an *authentic* place, i.e., the authentic Rick's as represented in the movie. Rick's idealization would need to be as close as possible to the celluloid representation so that it would be recognized as 'original'. The strategy was effective, at least for several customers. A customer noted, "As we know, Rick's Café exists because of the film *Casablanca*, which was not filmed in the city, just as the café did not exist and was idealized later in a clever marketing move" (TripAdvisor, July 2019). Another customer said, "A genius idea: to make a restaurant in the image and likeness of the café in the movie *Casablanca*, in Casablanca. The idea is executed to perfection" (TripAdvisor, June 2014).

(Fostering) Authentic Expectation

Awareness of the inauthenticity of the simulacra Rick's Café does not limit tourists engaging in an authentic experience in a real place. As Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) have argued, consumption experience in venues can be authentic, whether the venue is authentic or not. As stated by a consumer, "Even though you all know it's a copy, it's an experience. For fans of the film, it is an unmissable program and listening to 'As time goes by' is sensational" (TripAdvisor, November 2022). A Rick's Café employee (interview, April 2023) stated: "At night, we have a queue waiting to visit Rick's Café seeking the movie experience. Unfortunately, we are unable to accommodate everyone without a reservation, as the Café is fully booked every night".

As a fan noted, somewhat inaccurately both with respect to place and pianist, “The bar, by itself, is an icon in the city, as it takes us back to one of the most famous films of all time: *Casablanca*. It was exactly in this bar, to the sound of the piano that Humphrey played, that the characters met. The environment is a faithful translation of the movie’s setting, beautiful, magical, engaging!” (TripAdvisor, November 2017). A customer also noted: “Kathy didn’t intend to recreate Rick’s from the movie as it is, which would be kitsch and artificial. Instead, she made a café-inspired establishment that lives on in the imaginations of all of us. Screen in front, *Casablanca* plays in silence, but why sound if we know the dialogues by heart?” (TripAdvisor, March 2014).

Faking Reality

Ms. Kriger aimed to create an atmosphere that allowed both veracity and the imaginary to merge into the experiences of the patrons. As a customer commented, “Even if the setting is not the perfect replica that I expected, [...] the atmosphere and nostalgia that we have in us is from the place itself. Play it again... (highlights one of the film’s slogans)” (TripAdvisor, May 2018). Another customer observed that “The environment that makes us relive the romanticism of the movie *Casablanca* (...) transports us to live jazz music with a touch of refinement” and to the “sophisticated and simple environment” (TripAdvisor, November 2018; December 2019; January 2020). Furthermore, “even though it’s all fake, you can get in the mood”, stated a Brazilian visitor (October 2018). In addition, as the general manager said in an onsite interview, some “customers recognize scenes from the movie here in the Café as the real place”. On the other hand, a consumer criticized the place by stating the “perfect construction of the film’s scenery: it can be a simple curiosity or a tourist trap” (TripAdvisor, September 2016) created one of those fictional tourist sites (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Faking reality creates a cinematographic atmosphere, positioning the audience as the protagonist of their own construction of remembered experience, using a

performative space to trigger recollections. The place becomes a stage for enacting one's own dramas of memories of past and present passing.

Gatekeepers' Influence

Rick's Café has many potential formal and informal gatekeepers. Formal ones include travel agencies, tour guides, tourism social media, tour packages, digital influencers, and movie fans. Informally, friends and networking in general keep the dream alive. Each of these gatekeepers explicitly or implicitly maintains the fictional past in the staged present.

Gatekeepers are non-liminal persons deeply involved in the liminal process, typically functioning as guides or mentors (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar, 2021; Fagbola et al., 2018). These gatekeepers frame the liminal place (Hackley et al., 2012); they guard the ritual and help to keep it alive economically. Rick's gatekeepers represent a potential customer experience in which each person can use their imagination. The operational challenge for the actors in the *mise en scène* lies in dealing with the consumer's idealized context. When asking the general manager (on-site interview) if customers really believed the movie was shot in Casablanca, in the role of gatekeeper, he stated,

“For them, the scenes really happened in this restaurant. However, I always clarify that the film was not shot here. I inform everyone that this restaurant was inspired by the movie, but it is not the exact location where the scenes took place. I don't let people down.”

This makes the case even more interesting in terms of understanding the circumstances where the customers choose to *build* authenticity despite knowing the fake and unreal character of the context. They *build* the kind of authenticity they *want to* experience. Rick's Café's general manager ensures that the consumer's expectations are met according to the scripts and artefacts created in the imagination. Being inexact about the 'exact location' has its uses.

Liminal Interpretation

The second higher-order category, liminal interpretation, emerged from grouping two second-order themes: (i) *consumer sensemaking*, and (ii) *ambivalence*. Liminal interpretation encompasses the use of conscious cognitive activity (thinking, reasoning, or remembering) to make sense and give meaning to the liminal experience, i.e., the experience of being betwixt and between the real and the unreal. This higher-order category considers the meaning assigned to the liminal experience by the consumer, according to the interaction with the socio-material environment. The consumer accesses cognition, such as perception, reasoning, thoughts, comprehension, and senses, to interpret the ambiguity and disorientation of a fake reality.

Consumer Sensemaking

The experience of satisfaction of living a fiction, fulfilling a fantasy, makes awareness of the immaterial reality of the café as a fictitious place irrelevant. As a consumer stated, “Just push the door of Rick’s Café to arrive as if by magic in the ‘Casablanca’ of the 40s. A feast for the senses” (TripAdvisor, French, June 2023). Knowing that this is not the ‘real’ Rick’s Café does not detract from the satisfaction of the experience. As a customer commented, “We know that Rick’s Café from the movie *Casablanca* was fictional, and the movie wasn’t even shot here, but who can resist the Hollywood moment of taking a picture in front of Rick’s Café in Casablanca? Feeling like Ingrid Bergman with my Humphrey Bogart: ‘Play it, Sam!’” (TripAdvisor, Brazilian, June 2023). If you had never spent time watching *Casablanca*, the liminality of Rick’s Café would be meaningless.

When interpreting the experience, expectations may be met, even exceeded, or deeply disappointed: “The recreation of the Hollywood original ... what a disappointment” (posted on Café’s Instagram, May 2023). Some people were clearly confused about the relation between liminal memories and material reality when they stated, “I’m at Rick’s Café, where

some scenes of the movie were shot” (Turkish, October 2021; Danish, May 2023; Canadian, July 2023; Korean, July 2023 on TripAdvisor), as was the person who wrote, “the entrance remains the same and its interior remains the same as when the film was shot” (TripAdvisor, April 2015). Other tourism consumers were able to “feel that they were really consuming the past or getting a good idea of what life was in the past” (Bagnall, 1996, p. 236). Expectations could be exceeded, as “I walked in through the door I was totally taken aback as the interior unfolded. I sat in disbelief as I looked up, practically expecting Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman to show up ... I was so captivated by the place” (Trip Advisor, March 2014).

Ambivalence – Belonging to Both the Fictional and the Real

Ambivalence refers to the experience of two (*ambi*) opposing forces (valences). It is derived from the Latin *ambo*, or ‘both,’ and *valere*, meaning ‘to be strong’ (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Consumers are often able to play multiple and sometimes contradictory roles, ‘living with ambivalence’ and ‘dealing with contradictions’ (Ashforth et al., 2014) with a strong sense of belonging to ‘both’ worlds (fiction and reality, in this case), particularly in the process of sensemaking the liminal experience. Perceptions identifying the relative veracity or fakery of the copy were intrinsically related to the interpretation of the experience as betwixt and between the movie and the place. Mimesis was assumed to be almost real in many social constructions of reality.

On the one hand, some customers recognized that “although we know that it is not the original but a replica, it is worth knowing” (TripAdvisor, June 2015). On the other hand, as a customer noted, “The place is a perfect copy of the one in the movie *Casablanca*, including the pianist playing ‘As time goes by’ and giving customers the right to say, “Play it again, Sam!” (TripAdvisor, May 2016). “The restaurant maintains the same atmosphere as in the legendary film *Casablanca*! On the second floor, the pool table from the movie is immaculate and keeps the mood going with a big TV showing the movie the whole time! The place is

magical!” (TripAdvisor, April 2015). “All that’s missing is the roulette wheel of the casino and the dramatic, smoky atmosphere of the time”, jokes Tony, an Irishman. “This movie marked generations, and we didn’t escape”, opines a sexagenarian in an article for *Le Figaro* (November 2020).

Liminal Affectivity

The third higher-order category, liminal affectivity, emerged from grouping two second-order themes: (i) *affective memory*, and (ii) *cherished memories*. Liminal affectivity involves promoting a real experience to the consumer based on affective memory, where feelings are awakened by connecting fictional emotions to material reality. By embracing the emotions in the liminal experience, consumers seek to preserve memories of the experience and encourage others to desire the same.

Affective Memory

Creating an environment that aids access to imagination engages affective memory. The liminal *ambiance* allows for retro-experiencing the context of the movie, the sounds of jazz and signs of Moroccan orientalist culture. However, it differs from the film’s construction of the *mise en scène*. The place functions as a ‘memory chalet’ (Judt, 2010), in which consumers can deposit memories and establish an emotional connection that originated in memories of the movie. When accessing affective memory through the movie, consumers relate to a connection to the past, their remembering of seeing the film acting as a representation of a vivid emotional reality recalled. As a consumer noted, “The scenographic proposal of the environment invites the imagination. Imagination of those who have the images of the film *Casablanca* stored in their affective memory” (TripAdvisor, September 2017). Affective memory can also ironically idealize the place when the veracity of enactment does not match the cinematic representation. “I’m shocked, shocked, to find that gambling is not going on in here”, noted a Turkish visitor (TripAdvisor, April 2023), looking forward to

an original place, in an echo of a line of Claude Rains, acting as Captain Louis Renault in the film.

Cherished Memories

The ghosts of Bogart and Bergman and all the other memorable actors in *Casablanca* cannot haunt the room but their spectral presence can be hinted at and imagined. But remembering as a form of ritual homage needs its cues. “If you haven’t seen *Casablanca* yet, check it out”, stated a Russian on social media (TripAdvisor, April 2023). “An iconic location, an emotion and time stop!!!” shares a guest from Romania (TripAdvisor, March 2023). A memorable experience, if shared, has the power to influence others, mainly movie fans, to seek their own experience in this idealized liminal context. As one customer stated, “A dream to dance with my love to ‘As Time Goes By’ in Casablanca at the famous Rick’s Café. We danced to the music that was in our head and heart [...], and now we have a memory that will last a lifetime” (TripAdvisor, Spanish, May 2023). Expectations in the present relating to the cinematic past are created from social networks and social media, disseminating the experience, arousing consumer interest, and appreciating the memory of a memorable film. A Russian customer stated: “I want to keep this magical and cinematic atmosphere as a memory” (TripAdvisor, November 2022).

The memories cherished are not just of romance; Rick’s Café was/is a place of business then (in fiction) and now (in reality). Closed doors, total privacy, and in-depth discussion of political, social, and economic factors took place in the film as they do now in this other Rick’s Café. As the general manager stated (on-site interview), “There are many meetings between heads of state and ministers in Morocco at Rick’s Café”. An employee (on-site interview) added: “The private rooms are available for groups, set as in the film, and frequently visited by authorities and leaders in Morocco.”

Liminal Recreation

The fourth higher-order category, liminal recreation, emerged from grouping two second-order themes: *(i) performing experience*, and *(ii) experiencing authenticity*. A liminal recreation constitutes “a restorative obscurity replete with [the] consumption activities of those who are essentially no longer, but not yet” (Cody & Lawlor, 2011, p. 214). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) note that consumers seek an authentic consumption experience by establishing specific personal goals based on a purposeful choice of authenticity to shape the outcomes experienced.

Performing Experience

From an interpretative context, customers are ‘captivated’ by recreating the idealized experience of fantasy scenes in a real environment, a real context. A new conception is created, and the context is reassessed through the reality that the consumer constitutes and subsequently shares. When interviewed, the general manager stated, “Some people ask me where Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund kissed in the Ricks’ Café, Casablanca? I joke with them: It was in that place next to the piano. And customers answer me: So, we want to sit at the same table” to perform the same experience. A customer commented that “The experience takes you back to the 1940s, at the time of the movie.” (TripAdvisor, February 2016). Consumers use objects and actions in recreating the past in which “carnavalesque adult play and rites of intensification and transformation can freely take place” (Belk & Costa, 1998, p. 219). Furthermore, the connection of objects to highly valued elements of consumers' lived experience grounds authenticity in the ‘real’ world (Rose & Wood, 2005).

Experiencing Authenticity – Incorporating the Authenticity of the Recreated Environment

An experience is authentic when consumers incorporate the authenticity of the recreated environment and connect it to their memories of the film. In a liminal experience, being between the film and the moment, surrounded by culture, music, decoration, images,

architecture, and context, all referring to a classic film, becomes remarkable and emotionally *real*. A customer commented, “It’s like going back in time, I felt like I was on the set of the film *Casablanca*” (TripAdvisor, November 2015). Another noted that “Listening to ‘As time goes by’ at Rick’s Café is a unique experience” (TripAdvisor, February 2018). The authenticity paradox resides in the fact that the customer assumes an authentic experience in a *mise en scène* lovingly evoked to represent the visualization of *Casablanca*’s Rick’s Café, one that the movie’s fans, friends, family, social media, tour guides, among others, can relate to.

Discussion

Authenticity in the context of consumption represents an increasingly relevant topic within marketing literature (Chronis & Hampton, 2008; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Hietanen et al., 2020; Leigh et al., 2006). Brown (2001) argues that one of modern marketing’s central themes is the tension between authenticity and inauthenticity. The topic has also become prominent in travel research (Moore et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). However, as several authors have argued (Anthony & Joshi, 2017; Canavan, 2023; Hede & Thyne, 2010), despite an increasing role of the inauthentic in contemporary consumer culture, much of the research in this area has remained focused on the (objectively) authentic. Yet, as Canavan (2023, p. 368) pointed out, “authenticity and inauthenticity are dialectical” in that their perception may be simultaneous, porous, and mutually inspiring.

We contribute to a theory of liminal consumption (Tonner, 2016), contemporary consumption and its paradoxes (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009), authenticity in marketing approaches (Nunes, 2021), and existential authenticity of tourists’ experience (Moore et al., 2021; Stepchenkova & Belyaeva, 2021) by highlighting four main interrelated tensions around authenticity, supported by the liminal consumer experience: *paradoxical environment*, *paradoxical interpretation*, *paradoxical affectivity*, and *paradoxical recreation*. We suggest

that the condition of liminality creates these paradoxical tensions of authenticity that are navigated differently by different customers without one single form of resolution.

The paradoxes of authenticity depict these tensions in liminality as part of the magic of the place. In marketing terms, it is better to maintain the magical liminality rather than resolve it: the paradoxes preserve the liminal condition, which is a fundamental aspect of the experience. Outside this space, the space betwixt and between, Rick's would lose its character, its condition at the boundary between fantasy and reality. The paradoxical condition of persistence (Cunha & Clegg, 2018) makes an adequate conceptual tool to preserve ambiguity without dualistic either-or choices. The temporary persists at a 60 years remove into a future that will be ongoing for as long as the magic appreciates. Our approach emphasizes the fluidity between two worlds, the idealized and the realized, which, in this case, coexist as a magical context recreated in an original experience. Liminal consumption can be recognized as a fluid process in which the consumer immerses in liminality. The interaction between the paradoxical dimensions takes place in a fluid experience relating consumers' authentic expectations to their experience.

First, experience seems to be authentic when the created/enhanced liminal environment can be interpreted as a real experience, one strongly intertwined with the mimetic originality of the context with the memory of the film's staging. We recognize this perspective as constituting a 'paradoxical environment'. Rick's Café is not just a mere imitation or part of some franchise. It is in a class of its own, bestowed by the class of the cinematic memory. The liminal environment leads to (and is reciprocally experienced and recreated by) liminal interpretation, promoting a context conducive to consumer sensemaking of experience, including the affective component. The fictional context allows consumers to play interpretatively with the 'originality' of the place and assume the experience as original, according to personal interpretation. Perceived authenticity, in this way, can be manifest in

both 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'. The liminal interpretation allows a plastic reframing of the originality of the context according to the consumer. The liminal environment is related to affectivity evoked by specific experience, instigating the emotional connection to a liminal experience, while liminal affectivity reaffirms the affective memories generated in the consumer's expectation. Our study contributes to research on how consumers engage with paradox and ambiguity; in this case, paradoxes are felt bodily and emotionally as experiences of tension and ambivalence. While the role of affect, emotion and paradox has been studied in the case of contemporary consumption (Mick & Fournier, 1998), more needs to be known about how people address paradoxical consumption in cases intertwining authenticity and inauthenticity with specific consumer goals (e.g., consumption as play vs. consumption as play or as experience; see Gistri et al., 2009).

Second, consumers assume the role of protagonists, making a 'paradoxical interpretation' of their experiences of the film during interaction in the café. This corroborates that the authenticity of existence is self-creation and self-discovery generated in the interaction of activities (Wang, 1999). However, it contrasts with Chhabra's (2005) approach, which assumes that tourists are the receivers of authenticity. Although gatekeepers play an influential role in framing consumer perceptions of consumption, we found visitors providing gatekeepers with clues about their own interpretations, which retro-feed expectations of other consumers' seeking similar experiences in the same environment. Past consumers influence gatekeepers that can also influence prospective customers based on reframing the experience. Consumers can paradoxically interpret the veracity of a fake by assuming the originality of the experience through their sensemaking process. The process is unique for each consumer, and interpretation is personal in different circumstances. In this sense, consumers identify different elements of fantasy-in-reality yet create diverse meanings to these elements to connect their own experience as it unfolds. On the other hand, a paradoxical recreation

reconstructs the imaginary experience through a new meaning during the real experience. It is paradoxical to reconstruct something fake when it never existed; it is the reality of the consumer's fantasy of *Casablanca* that is being constructed. By examining consumers' perceptions of Ricks' Café, authenticity is based on the recreation of personal experience, where the consumer provides new meanings and makes the experience original for themselves.

Third, although gatekeepers play the role of 'guardians' of the experience, consumers who enjoy their liminal experience also assume a gatekeeper role by publicly embedding their experience in predominant tropes. Consumers memorize the experience and influence prospective customers to share their cherished memories of the film and its experience in this ritual space. This corresponds to a form of 'paradoxical affectivity' of accounts. The tension of affective authenticity involves the expression of emotions created in fictional accounts to recreate experience, while creating new memories, memories based on the validation of affective memories constituted prior to liminal consumption. The experiences shared by consumers involve intense affect for the visitor. These are not emotions based on imagination, so much as emotions revisited after feeling a *material* reality of *fantasy*. Therefore, we present the paradox of affectivity, which shares cherished memories among a community of authentic emotions created in an original experience.

Fourth, the liminality of the environment allows consumers to switch constantly from reality to fantasy, according to idealized context and expectations, in a 'paradoxical recreation'. Rick's is thus a liminal space 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1964) referred to as "that which is neither this nor that, but both" (Turner, 1967, p. 99). A space conjoins the worlds of fact and fiction, as is recognized in consumer culture (e.g., Cody, 2012; Ogle et al., 2013). In this sense, the liminal environment enables perpetual recreating of fantasy by presenting elements that refer to the movie, musical ambience, and local culture to enable the

consumer to create an ‘original’, ‘authentic’, experience in an environment that is not authentic, insofar as the physical structure also differs from that of the fiction. The consumer is led to furnish scenes from their own imagination while recreating reality from the furniture in their memory. It is a paradoxical experience, considering the inauthenticity of the place, acting as an original recreation of a real experience that was only ever a temporary moment on a sound stage and a backlot.

In summary, Rick’s plays with paradox, offering a *both-and* type of experience (Smith & Lewis, 2022). It is both fake and original, temporary and timeless; it claims the movie’s legacy but does not hide its true nature, as it constitutes a co-constructed experience between sellers and buyers. The importance of paradox theory for understanding contradictions has been highlighted (Berti et al., 2021) but its potential to contribute to consumer culture and behavior still needs to be expanded. With this article, we contribute to the consideration of paradox in understanding consumer’s experiences – in particular, those of tourists.

Implications for Theory

For theory, we advance four main ways to conceptualize authenticity: authenticity as practice, authenticity as a polysemic construct, authenticity as socially constructed (as dualism or duality), and authenticity as paradoxically experienced. First, our work presents authenticity as practice: it is the way people engage with Rick’s that defines the nature of the experience. While the deliberately created liminal environment influences the consumer’s experience, the latter also build and shape the former. It is often assumed, even if implicitly, that authenticity is a property of an entity (e.g., when assuming that “consumers crave authenticity”; Nunes et al., 2021, p. 1); we present a different and complementary perspective, underlining the importance of how ‘authenticity’ is conceptualized (Nunes et al., 2021). For some, Rick’s is authentic, whereas for others, it is a replica. However, for many, the replica (i.e., the fake) is deliberately interpreted, felt, and experienced as being authentic. As

expressed in our data, it is the meaning of experience that defines the nature of the place. Therefore, we present authenticity as a practice. Practice refers to the way people act by engaging in an activity that is consequential for the development of experience (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011).

In this sense, authenticity resides not in the object but in the object in the eye and memory of the beholder. For this reason, authenticity is socially constructed (as dualism or duality), a finding that supports research suggesting that the authenticity of the ‘object’ does not require being certified by an external, independent, and objective expert (‘cool authentication’) – rather it can be ‘certified’ by the performer, the consumer, the tourist (i.e., ‘hot authentication’; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). While, for some, authenticity can be taken as a dualism – a thing is authentic, or it is fake (the either-or view) – for others, it can be both, as in a duality: even though the place is a replica, it is also capable of transmitting the ambience of the movie, making it experientially meaningful and therefore authentic (the both-and view).

The previous notes also suggest that authenticity is a polysemic construct with multiple meanings – not just for *different* consumers but also for *each* consumer. Even though the place may be materially inauthentic, it can be existentially, personally, and emotionally authentic. Visitors can rightfully claim that they have been at *the Rick’s Café* – in that they adopted cognitive, emotional, and behavioral ‘strategies’ that allow them to interpret, feel and recreate the experience as real.

Overall, our study also suggests that tourism research may benefit from adopting a paradoxical lens to study authenticity. It is possible, at least in some circumstances and places, that consumers experience the objective, the constructive and the existential authenticities (Wang, 1999) – both simultaneously and paradoxically. What we observe in our case, which may be observed in other cases, is a phenomenon of *blurred authenticities*. Authenticity is socially constructed upon an objective and material authenticity (i.e., the real,

objective, material Rick's Café). However, such an objective materiality is experienced as being authentic only because of an idea of a reality that pre-existed it, located only in the movie and its emotional affect. The real Rick's is authentic in that it is not a replica of the pre-existing original because that original never existed. At the same time, it is inauthentic in that such an authenticity is experienced because of an idea of the *real* conveyed by the movie. It is because of that inauthentic authenticity that customers have the opportunity to experience a kind of existential authenticity. Rick's Café is, therefore, even from the perspective of *objective* authenticity, both authentic and inauthentic. Future studies may explore such a paradoxicality in other places and contexts.

Implications for Practice

Several researchers have acknowledged “the practical relevance of authenticity in tourism management” (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 1460) and noted that the concept of authenticity assumes a crucial role in tourism practice (Moore et al., 2021). Our conceptualization and theorizing have thus several practical implications. Our work suggests that some places can *deliberately* cultivate ambiguity and blur the boundaries between the objective, the socially constructed and the existential *authenticities* to construct *idiosyncratic paradoxical* experiences of authenticity. Taking authenticity as duality means that ambiguity can be used to maintain a feel of non-place authenticity. The paradoxes of authenticity provide practical implications in multiple interpretations and discourses of different liminal environments that guide the consumer to an original experience. In this diversity of interpretations, under what conditions would the consumer engage in liminal experiences where the material and the ideational merge? Certainly, the condition of authentic-fake similarity, the emotional appeal of the story adopted, and the desire to materialize fantasy are aspects of attracting the consumer's attention and expectations. However, we go beyond these by providing practical implications.

First, marketing strategies may turn the imagination into some original experience. Transforming an imaginary place into a material substance worthy of being visited can be a marketing strategy replicated in different sectors – as illustrated by the case of Las Vegas, the ‘absolute fake’ (Eco, 1986a; see also Douglass & Raento, 2004) which, again, reveals the nuanced nature of authenticity. Such a transformation, and the correspondent fakery-authenticity paradox, may even be built around consumer (material) goods, including food and beverage. The case of Hendrick’s gin is illustrative (Vanderbilt, 2019). A bottle of this brand of gin looks like it has been retrieved from a Victorian apothecary, and that impression is reinforced by “Est. 1886”, the date that appears on the bottle label. This date is both authentic (the gin is produced by William Grant & Sons, a distillery that opened in Scotland 137 years ago) and fake (the gin brand itself was launched in 1999). For consumers, being aware of the fake side of the ‘story’ probably doesn’t destroy their sense of being emotionally within the “magical and whimsical world of the Victorian era” (Nguyen, 2021).

Therefore, and this is our second point, organizations may promote structural and emotional conditions for interpretive engagement. One example is Emily Dickinson’s Home, Amherst, Massachusetts, transforming Emily Dickinson’s Home into a literary destination (Wald, 2017); likewise, the many visitors to Shakespeare’s Stratford-upon-Avon or the Brontës’ Haworth. Third, emotional aspects, which activate affective memory, may be connected through a well-informed narrative with the consumer’s expectations regarding the proposed reality. Ricks’ Café is not an isolated case. For example, as Fjellman (1992, p. 255) observed, at Disney World, “things are not just real or fake but real real, fake real, real fake, and fake fake”. Wang (1999, p. 357) also observed that at Disney World, “there is no absolute boundary between the real and the fake. The real may turn into the fake and vice versa.” This reciprocal *transmutation* has a strong emotional base. For instance, consumers do even ‘cry’ when they embrace Mickey Mouse at Disneyland (Boje, 1995) – a real character that never

existed other than in cartoons. What makes it more intriguing is that everyone knows that this rodent was characterized as a cartoon. The experience can involve childhood emotions activated as affective memories when being face-to-face with Mickey. This context can be replicated throughout the Disneyland environment and in all memorable characters for generations.

Limitations and Future Work

Rick's Café is unique in some respects, making it an idiosyncratic place of and for consumption (Cody, 2012). It is possible to assume that, for most visitors, Rick's constitutes a non-habitual consumer experience (Farjoun & Mahmood, 2023), which makes the findings hard to generalize to habitual consumption (although the examples presented above also suggest otherwise). For the non-cinephile, Rick's may be just another restaurant.

The use of social media as sources of data meant limited detail and depth of the consumer experience, as well as an acceptance of the bias of consumers influencing others in social media (by sharing a fake perception). Future studies may explore the implications of other liminal spaces and experiences for different target groups, different cultures, and different destinations would also be useful. While Rick's Café has been successful, future studies may explore boundary conditions that affect the success of other liminal spaces and environments.

Conclusion

Moore et al. (2021, p. 1) noted that, while the concept of authenticity is crucial for both research and practice, "authenticity remains conceptually contested and has taken few steps towards becoming an 'anchor' for a tourism paradigm." While the 'contestation' has several roots, one of those roots may be the researchers' and practitioners' discomfort and even resistance in acknowledging and dealing with paradoxes. However, if, as Smelik (2011, p. 82) pointed out, authenticity is "paradoxically, a mere performance", then the case of

Casablanca's Rick's Café offers an extraordinary opportunity to explore the paradoxes raised by the notion of authenticity. As a site, Rick's is original, but it did not pre-date the movie. Instead, it imitates the original, imaginary place. The case highlights the tensions inherent to authenticity. Rick's Café may constitute an extreme case, but there is no unambiguous notion of an authentic locale that celebrates history and memory.

Even when consumers are aware (and experience cognitions and feelings) of paradoxicality, it is not necessarily seen as problematic but as a reflection of a complex reality that intertwines the imaginary, memories of the imaginary, and its place in the real. For marketing and tourism theory, Rick's Café is a setting that is unique in terms of revealing contradictions intrinsic to the idea of place-based hospitality. What makes the case unique is the confluence of originality and imitation that turns Rick's into a liminal place, between dream and reality, image and substance. This liminal position suggests that the site exists at several interfaces: Casablanca and Hollywood, cinema and real life, immateriality, and materiality, memory of times past and the romance of time present. The fact that consumers are aware of this liminal condition in this case, and others, only makes it more nuanced in terms of exposing the paradoxes of authenticity as well as authenticity as paradox. We conclude that certain kinds of authenticity can be paradoxical when situated betwixt a cherished memory and a fabricated place made magical by those memories.

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Table 1*Chronology of events*

1942	The film ‘Casablanca’ was released on December 7
1944	It received an Oscar nomination for 8 categories: best film, best actor, best supporting actor, best direction, best adapted screenplay, best cinematography, best editing, and best soundtrack. It won Oscars for best film, best director and best adapted screenplay.
1946	Kathleen Anne Kriger was born in Portland, Oregon, in June 1946. After founding a travel agency in 1974, she joined the State Department, which posted her as a commercial attaché to Casablanca, an Atlantic coastal port that is Morocco’s business center and biggest city.
1989	The ‘Casablanca’ film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry being deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” (Wikipedia).
1998	From the demand of tourists, Kathy Kriger, resident in Casablanca since 1998, decided to bring fiction to reality.
2004	Rick’s Cafe in Casablanca was opened in a converted old house in the <i>Ancienne Medina</i> , or old city. Kriger ran the establishment for 14 years, receiving clientele from all around the world, including ambassadors and celebrities.
2005	‘Casablanca’ was named one of the 100 Best Films of the Past 80 Years by Time magazine (selected films were not ranked).
2006	The Writers Guild of America, West voted Casablanca’s screenplay the greatest of all time on their list of “101 Greatest Screenplays”. The film has been recognized multiple times by the American Film Institute in many of its lists.
2012	Publication of the book “Rick’s Cafe: bringing the legend to life in Casablanca” by Kathy Kriger.
2018	Kathy Kriger died after a stroke and a heart attack, aged 72.
2023	Rick’s Café remains in operation.

Table 2*Data sources*

Category	Information source	Main purpose
Websites	Rickscafe.ma (official website) Tripadvisor.com (3,424 citations) Trip.com (122 citations) Fr.restaurantguru.com (1,033) Monnuage.fr (9 citations) City seeker (1 article) Insight Vacations (1 article) Morocco Travel blog (1 article) Lefigaro.fr (1 article)	Collecting expressions, ideas, opinions, experience records and expectation versus reality information.
Unstructured interviews	1 General manager 4 Employees	Exploring examples of customer interaction.
Visit on site	Non-participant observation	Observing the functioning of the place and the expression of the consumer during the experience.
Rick's Café social media	Instagram (@rickscafe_casablanca) Facebook (Rick's Café Casablanca) YouTube (@RicksCasaOfficial)	Analyzing how Rick's Café acts as a gatekeeper and provides expectations for the consumer.
Video publications	Lives in Rick's (839 videos) Jazz Sessions (109 videos) Miscellaneous events (20 videos) Forbes Middle East (1 video)	Identifying "how" the consumer has experienced Rick's Café over the past 6 years.
Official book published (Kriger 2012)	History of the Rick's and the interview recorded (Nordland, 2018b)) and published with the owner of the Café.	Seeking to understand how consumer demand was met. Exploring the conception, inspiration, and implementation of the business.

Figure 1

Data structure

