

Between illusion and authenticity: Understanding visitors' experience in a fictional heritage site

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Abstract : This paper explores how visitors experience and interpret tourism in a heritage site that is fundamentally fictional: Juliet's House in Verona. Drawing on theoretical approaches to authenticity in marketing and tourism, we analyze a corpus of around 1,000 online reviews collected from TripAdvisor in 2024. The qualitative analysis highlights four main dimensions of the visitor experience: the perception of the site as a must-see attraction, the disappointment linked to its artificial character, the sacralization through collective rituals, and the emotional intensity of the individual experience. These findings reveal the ambivalence of fictional tourism, oscillating between denounced illusion and lived authenticity, and confirm that touristic authenticity is above all a social and emotional construct. From a managerial perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of combining historical transparency with immersive experiential devices to address the diverse expectations of visitors. Juliet's House thus illustrates the power of cultural imaginaries to transform an ordinary space into a must-visit destination and to redefine the boundaries between fiction and reality in contemporary tourism.

Keywords: Tourism marketing / Fictional tourism / Authenticity / Tourist narratives

The links between cultural fictions and tourism have been strengthening in recent years, as audiovisual narratives increasingly permeate public space and influence collective imaginaries. So-called “fictional tourism” or *film-induced tourism* is characterized by traveling to discover real places associated with fictional narratives—whether drawn from cinema, television, literature, or video games. The observation made by Beeton about the future of research in this field has been confirmed two decades later (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025) with a multiplication of studies.

1. Introduction

A fertile tension between reality and fiction shapes contemporary tourism. Beyond the discovery of “authentic” landscapes or monuments, visitors increasingly seek symbolic experiences, nourished by cultural, literary, or cinematic narratives. Fictional tourism exemplifies this phenomenon: it reveals the power of collective imaginaries in shaping tourist practices and raises questions about the notion of authenticity. This trend, which carries significant marketing and territorial implications, is particularly evident in the example of Juliet’s House in Verona, an emblematic site where fiction and tourism intersect. Known worldwide, the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* materializes in Verona most notably through a balcony... added in the twentieth century. The city, very real, provides the setting for a fictional drama whose location has been “materialized” by the municipality of Verona through an orchestrated theatricalization.

1.1. The general context

The links between cultural fictions and tourism have intensified with the proliferation of audiovisual narratives, further reinforced by the rise of streaming platforms. *Film-induced tourism* is defined by visiting places associated with fictional narratives, whether originating from cinema, television, literature, or video games. Already noted by Beeton (2025), this phenomenon has been confirmed, with recent research showing clear acceleration in the field (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). A 2024 Ipsos study for the CNC¹ highlights that cinema and television series strongly encourage travel: 80% of foreign tourists state that such productions influence their choice of destination, and 73% spontaneously recall a memory linked to a French fiction. These findings confirm that fictions can serve as a powerful lever for tourism marketing, by producing representations that duplicate the real territory and enhance its attractiveness for visitors (Chevrier and Lefort, 2023).

1.2. The ambiguous status of Juliet’s House in Verona

Here, we focus on Juliet’s House in Verona, Italy, a city also known as one of the “cities of lovers” (with Venice as another variant). This qualification of Verona as a “city of lovers” refers to Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet*, written and published at the end of the sixteenth century, whose plot is set in the city. The choice of this particular fiction is based on its renown and the numerous adaptations and variations it has inspired—in cinema, television series, but also dance, classical music, and opera—making it a widely known and shared story.

1.3. Research question

Fictional tourism represents a potential lever to reconfigure the image of a place by activating the

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<https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/etudes-et-rapports/etudes-prospectives/impact-du-cinema-et-de-la-fiction-tv-sur-le-tourisme-en-france>

collective imaginary associated with certain cultural works. However, what actually happens on the visitors' side when they confront a site that mixes real elements (for instance, a house that could be considered historical, or a spatial arrangement corresponding to scenes from the play) and fictional ones, or even where fiction predominates? How do they perceive and react to this hybridization? More importantly, how do they construct their own experience — and their own narrative — when faced with this fictionalized setting?

Before considering the marketing uses of such a site, it is essential to understand what visitors do with this fiction: do they accept it as an emotional truth? Do they reject it as a commercial illusion? Or do they consciously play with the codes of the myth in order to create a personal experience?

2. The authenticity of an imaginary place

The question of authenticity lies at the heart of the tension that characterizes fictional tourist sites and tourism in general (Rickly, 2022). How do visitors perceive a site rooted in fiction as “authentic”? To shed light on this paradox, scholars must revisit the different theoretical approaches to authenticity, particularly in tourism marketing, in order to explain how an imaginary place can generate a genuinely meaningful experience.

2.1. Authenticity as a plural notion at the crossroads of several disciplines

Marketing research often mobilizes the notion of authenticity (Camus, 2004; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), as do studies focusing on tourism marketing (Camus, 2010; Reydet et al., 2024). Far from being univocal, authenticity has gradually developed through diverse interpretative frameworks (Ghorbal & Temessek–Behi, 2022). These fundamental approaches draw on anthropology, sociology, philosophy, or psychoanalysis, yet the concept remains debated and relevant for understanding marketing phenomena in tourism (Lehman et al., 2019).

2.2. Authenticity rooted in the materiality of place

The “objectivist” approach is perhaps the oldest. It considers authenticity as an intrinsic quality of the object or site: what is authentic is what is original, preserved, and faithful to its materiality and to its history. Strongly present in museums or heritage studies, this perspective relies on a sharp distinction between the original and the copy. However, this rigid conception tends to be increasingly challenged today, notably because it neglects the share of subjectivity inherent in any tourist experience (Camus, 2010).

2.3. Perceived, lived, and constructed authenticity

The constructivist approach, which now important in the tourism literature highlights precisely this dimension. It defends the idea that authenticity does not belong to the object but results from social construction, an individual perception forged through the visitor's expectations, representations, and cultural context. Authenticity thus becomes a personal judgment, shaped by lived experience and by the gaze each person casts on what they visit (Rickly, 2022).

Even more radical, the postmodernist approach dismisses the very relevance of the distinction between true and false. In a society saturated with images and simulacra, the copy can be just as evocative—if not more powerful—than the original. Replicas such as Lascaux II illustrate this idea: material authenticity matters less than the ability to evoke emotion or to immerse visitors in a credible narrative (Rickly, 2022).

In a more intimate register, the existentialist approach shifts the focus from the object to the

subject. What matters here is the experience lived by the individual and its resonance with their “true self.” Authenticity becomes an existential quest: what is authentic is what makes me feel aligned with myself, in harmony with my deepest values (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

2.4. Performed authenticity: between staging and the search for meaning

This introspection extends into the performative approach, which emphasizes the co-constructed and staged character of authenticity. Authenticity takes shape through the interaction between individuals and places, between narratives and practices. People perform authenticity by activating it through behaviors, discourses, and emotions. It remains social, fluid, and evolving (Rickly, 2022). Finally, the psychoanalytic approach, more recent, interprets authenticity as a form of fantasy or refuge. It responds to a deep need to escape a world perceived as artificial, standardized, and disconnected from the essential. Here authenticity functions as a mirror of desire, an often-unattainable ideal, but one that proves powerfully mobilizing.

2.5. Juliet’s House: an emblematic case of fictional authenticity

While the objectivist approach would dismiss Juliet’s House as inauthentic, the other perspectives provide tools to understand how this fiction-based site can nevertheless be perceived as authentic and hold significant meaning for tourists. Authenticity then becomes a matter of perception, social construction, lived experience, and emotional connection rather than simple historical truth. Juliet’s House thus illustrates how tourism can thrive around cultural and imaginary constructions, and how the different approaches to authenticity help us analyze these phenomena.

3. Methodology

We analyze the comments posted on TripAdvisor concerning Juliet’s House. Using a web scraping technique, we extracted the comments over a one-year period (2024), which represents about one thousand verbatims and more than 300,000 characters. We exported the data into an Excel spreadsheet to allow for clearer visualization and exploitation.

Total number of comments	1005
Shortest comment:	80 characters
Longest comment:	1718 characters
Average length:	306 characters
Total size of the corpus:	307087 characters

This material stands out for its scale but also for its fragmented nature: a vast collection of small texts, each written as a complete statement, sometimes in a telegraphic style, often dense, and frequently evoking several aspects in a concise way. Following a classic approach, we carried out a qualitative analysis using content analysis (Bardin, 2005). We applied a multidimensional coding of the comments, in line with the recommendations of Dumez (2022).

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the comments highlights the ways visitors negotiate the tension between fiction and reality at Juliet’s House. Four main dimensions emerge. First, visitors describe the site as a must-see stop, underlining the power of literary imagination to influence tourist practices. Second, some express disappointment at the “fake,” revealing a persistent expectation of material authenticity. In contrast, others engage in collective rituals that contribute to the sacralization of the site. Finally, beyond these contrasting perceptions, visitors largely experience

the site as emotional and intimate. These findings shed light on the multiple ways visitors interact with a fictionalized place.

4.1. The power of fiction in the tourist experience: an unmissable site

Visiting Juliet's House appears as an almost mandatory step. The site exerts strong appeal, and many visitors include it in their tour of the city. The comments underline how literary fiction can shape tourist reality. Even though visitors know that *Romeo and Juliet* is entirely fictional, they still feel a strong attraction to the site. The expression "a must-see" shows how popular culture, nourished by Shakespeare and the imaginary generated by his play, almost imposes this visit as a ritual step. The comments highlight this paradox: a fiction turned into a tourist reality, proof of the mobilizing power of fiction on the collective imagination.

Example of verbatim (Comment n°618): "Located in a side street a few minutes' walk from the main square, this is a must-see during any trip to Verona. When we arrived, there was a huge crowd of tourists from all over the world."

4.2. The tension between fiction and reality: the risk of falseness

While fiction stimulates visitors' imagination, they may also feel deceived by what they discover on site. The gap between the idealized place and the actual reality can produce a sense of disillusionment.

Some visitors express disenchantment when they perceive the site as a deliberately maintained illusion. The use of terms such as "tourist trap" or "commercial construction" reveals a disappointed expectation of authenticity. The comments emphasize the contrast between the legend and historical truth, showing that for some, realizing that everything is invented diminishes the value of the experience. This tension between what one knows (fiction) and what one lives (the on-site experience) creates an ambivalent relationship.

Example of verbatim (comment n°464): "A house of no interest and yet I am a big fan of *Romeo and Juliet*! The interior is decorated with fake old furniture without charm, and with photos here and there of actors who played in the theater play."

4.3. The sacralization of an imaginary place

Despite its fictional character, Juliet's House hosts quasi-religious rituals. These practices partly result from the commercialization of the site, with the existence of a shop and an entry fee to visit the museum that enable these rituals. But the rituals go beyond mere commercialization: visitors declare their love, touch the statue's chest, or pose for photos on the balcony.

Visitors also leave padlocks, write love notes on the walls, touch the statue, and mention young people coming to deposit their romantic wishes. These gestures express a form of sacralization of an imaginary place, which becomes a concrete support for collective beliefs and emotions. The site thus turns into a sanctuary of romantic love, appropriating the codes of traditional pilgrimage.

Example of verbatim (Comment n°253): "Right at the entrance, love declarations in every language. In the courtyard, just a small balcony, but not just any balcony... Juliet's or Giulietta's. (...) At the back of the courtyard, a statue representing Juliet. Inside, her house has been transformed into a museum. It's cool to see in order to keep the legend of ROMEO AND JULIET alive."

4.4. An experience above all emotional

Even though visitors remain aware of the site's artificiality, their on-site emotions often feel

sincere. Several comments mention touching moments, such as a visitor who “melted with emotion” or couples kissing “in a magical moment.” The experience takes precedence over historical truth, and the site becomes an intimate stage where people replay their own romantic scene. The visit draws its emotional power precisely from this self-staging within a fictional setting

Example of verbatim (Comment n°43): “Obviously you have to go there... it’s romantic, it’s beautiful, even if it’s theater.”

4.5. Revisiting authenticity

These results echo debates on tourist authenticity. The disappointment expressed by some visitors reflects an expectation of objectivist authenticity, focused on the materiality of the site and its historical conformity (Camus, 2010). In contrast, the enthusiasm linked to rituals or lived emotions illustrates existential (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and performative forms of authenticity (Rickly, 2022), where the site’s value lies in its intimate resonance or the collective practices that make it meaningful. The sacralization of Juliet’s House also confirms Iuso’s (2021) analysis, describing the site as a “literary illusion” turned heritage by the power of myth.

More broadly, these observations extend research on *film-induced tourism* (Beeton, 2006; Connell, 2012), showing how fictional places can acquire an almost unavoidable status in tourist itineraries. They also fit within a constructivist perspective in which authenticity does not constitute an intrinsic quality but a social and cultural production (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Lehman et al., 2019). Juliet’s House thus appears as an exemplary case to grasp the ambivalence of fictional tourism: oscillating between denounced illusion and lived authenticity, it reveals how visitors actively negotiate the boundary between fiction and reality.

4.6. Practical implications

These findings also provide operational insights for tourism marketing. Given the contrasting expectations of visitors, it seems necessary to embrace and promote the dual nature of Juliet’s House: both fictional and heritage.

On the one hand, mediation tools could strengthen historical transparency to address those seeking objectivist authenticities, for example through pedagogical or digital content retracing the real history of the site, the fiction, and the myth itself. On the other hand, it is crucial to cultivate existential and emotional authenticity through immersive and participatory experiences: theatrical performances, writing workshops for letters to Juliet, or interactive digital tools that allow visitors to inscribe their own narrative. Finally, practices already common on site (locks, graffiti, and photos on the balcony) could be more effectively framed and highlighted as identity markers of the site rather than simply tolerated behaviors.

Such a hybrid strategy—combining historical accuracy with fictional power—could consolidate the attractiveness of Juliet’s House while enhancing visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

5. Conclusion

The study of Juliet’s House in Verona highlights the ambivalence that lies at the core of fictional tourism. Some visitors denounce the site’s artificiality and express a disappointed expectation of objectivist authenticity. Others mobilize existential, performative, or constructivist registers, giving meaning to their experience through emotion, rituals, or the projection of their own narratives. These findings confirm that authenticity, far from being a material property, constitutes a plural construct that oscillates between illusion and emotional truth. They extend research on tourist authenticity (Camus, 2010; Rickly, 2022; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and on *film-induced tourism* (Beeton, 2006; Connell, 2012), by emphasizing the role of cultural fictions

in shaping territories. From a managerial perspective, they encourage tourism stakeholders to move beyond a logic limited to historical accuracy and to consider instead the experiential and symbolic value of fictional sites. More broadly, Juliet's House illustrates the power of imaginaries to transform an ordinary space into an essential destination, confirming that in contemporary tourism, authenticity is not only believed but also lived.

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