

Theme and authenticity: experiencing heritage at The Venetian

Theme and
authenticity

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Received 13 March 2020
Revised 22 May 2020
Accepted 27 May 2020

Abstract

Purpose – This article analyzes the concepts of experience economy and promotion of authenticity at The Venetian Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas by exploring the resort's tangible and intangible heritage use in design and marketing strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study conducts a content analysis of marketing material, historical documents, and site observations.

Findings – Visitors' active involvement, combined with The Venetian's use of tangible and intangible heritage, is used in creating an authentic themed experience. In addition, our study suggests that authenticity constitutes a key concept for today's hospitality industry.

Research limitations/implications – This study centers on a single case study, and requires adjustments in order to be replicated. However, The Venetian represents one of the most prominent models followed by the hospitality industry worldwide.

Practical implications – This analysis provides a baseline for comparison among resorts that have theming but do not integrate it in the same way, or in general, to other professionals and academics considering themed experiences.

Social implications – The manuscript centers on several aspects that are being debated in numerous fields, from business to sociology, such as customers' desire for authentic experiences through the creation of themed attractions.

Originality/value – This research fills a gap in hospitality marketing research into authenticity and themed experience by investigating how The Venetian Hotel and Casino uses the heritage of another, tourism-focused city (Venice) to promote itself. The investigation uncovers how themed attractions in hospitality create an experience-based involvement that centers on the authenticity of the theme (in our case cultural heritage) they replicate.

Keywords Experience, Authenticity, Las Vegas, Experience economy, The Venetian, Theme

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the example of Las Vegas demonstrates, the hospitality industry increasingly offers theme-based experiences that follow the Disneyland model (Gottdiener *et al.*, 1999; Franci and Zignani, 2005). Analyzing design models on the Las Vegas Strip between 1985 and 1995, Al (2017) explains how resorts on the Strip started adding “layers of fantasy architecture and theme park fun” (p. 133). This trend parallels two key marketing research concepts, the *experience economy* and *promotion of authenticity* (Pine and Gilmore, 2007). These concepts



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International Hospitality Review
Vol. 34 No. 2, 2020
pp. 153-172
Emerald Publishing Limited
2516-8142
DOI 10.1108/IHR-03-2020-0008

suggest that successful businesses must stage memorable *intangible* experiences for their customers, as is common in entertainment experiences. As [Pine and Gilmore \(2011\)](#) explain, a fundamental element for the production of staged experiences is the creation of themes capable to capture customers' attention. Experience creation often goes hand in hand with the concept of authenticity, since consumers increasingly demand experiences they perceive as authentic, including a sense of genuineness and reality ([Pine and Gilmore, 2007](#)). In this study, we use The Venetian Hotel and Casino (The Venetian) in Las Vegas as a case study of authenticity and experience, analyzing how the resort's marketing activities promote their contribution to the experience economy.

The Venetian serves as an ideal case study due to its prominence and tenure on the Las Vegas Strip as a themed attraction. Opened in 1999, the Venetian painstakingly reproduces major landmarks in the Italian city of Venice. The St. Mark's Bell Tower replica welcomes guests entering from the Strip, followed by a copy of the Rialto Bridge that crosses a re-created Grand Canal. The property's shopping mall hosts additional replicas of Venice's canals and architectural features, while Venetian-style frescoes surround the hotel lobby and the casino. One of the main entertainment attractions of The Venetian is the *gondola* rides, whose gondoliers entertain tourists with Italian-sounding songs and anecdotes. In The Venetian, "boundaries between 'high art' and popular culture" are blurred ([Raento and Flusty, 2006](#), p. 115). This themed attraction does not just promote an authentic Venice experience composed by Renaissance artworks, but also a real *Las Vegas experience*, inclusive of wedding venues, casinos, pools and restaurants. [Raento and Flusty \(2006\)](#) also note that The Venetian promotes a certain kind of *infotainment*, with material – such as booklets – conflating historic facts about the Italian city "with entertaining fiction" (p. 115).

Scholars from many disciplines, such as business, sociology, history and architecture, have analyzed Las Vegas's themed resorts and their symbolic representations, explaining that creating themed experiences is a core part of Las Vegas's history (see, e.g. [Al, 2017](#); [Gottdiener et al., 1999](#); [Franci and Zignani, 2005](#)). Historians, for example, write that the Wild West-style theme in casinos predates the Las Vegas Strip, as examples such as El Rancho, Last Frontier and El Cortez show ([Al, 2017](#); [Moehring and Green, 2005](#)). The famed Bugsy Siegel opened the Flamingo in 1946, which "ushered in tropical and desertified theming – the Tropicana, the Sands, the Dunes, the Desert Inn, the Sahara, the Aladdin – as well as continental chic as in the Riviera and Caesars Palace" ([Douglass and Raento, 2004](#)). When the Caesars Palace opened in 1966, its Roman-Greco motif "provided the most immersive casino experience yet" ([Al, 2017](#), p. 90). This progressed into the following decade, and as [Venturi et al. \(1977\)](#) describe, the Las Vegas experience offered the opportunity to immerse oneself in multiple experiences:

(. . .) for three days one may imagine oneself a centurion at Caesars Palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jetsetter at the Riviera rather than a salesperson from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey (p. 53).

More recent studies on the Las Vegas Strip primarily focus on the so-called "Disneyland phase" of Las Vegas ([Al, 2017](#); [Gottdiener et al., 1999](#); [Franci and Zignani, 2005](#)). In the 1980s, Las Vegas exported the Disneyland model, with resorts following the theme park example ([Al, 2017](#)). In the following years, attractions such as Treasure Island (known today as TI), the Excalibur and the New York New York all opened with themed architecture that gave the Strip a popularity it had never had before ([Moehring and Green, 2005](#)).

The current study

In this in-depth study centered on a single unit, we analyze The Venetian's promotional material through the marketing lens, focusing on the key concepts of the experience economy

and the promotion of authenticity. The Strip experience – composed by elements such as casinos, shows, nightclubs, restaurants and pools – is noted as a model for entertainment tourism that is exported all over the world (Kent and Brown, 2009). Quantitative and qualitative research inquiries have both shown that the city's branding strategy is successful, thanks to the experiences that Las Vegas' resorts are able to create (Kneesel *et al.*, 2010). We chose The Venetian as a case study given the uniqueness of this attraction. Differently from other themed resorts on the Strip, which replicate a general theme, The Venetian painstakingly reproduces a single location. As The Venetian's website explains:

The Venetian Resort was envisioned as a tribute to the famed city of Venice, Italy, location of the honeymoon of Mr. Sheldon and Dr. Miriam Adelson. To recreate the city's landmarks – as well as its charm – artists, architects and experts conducted extensive research in Venice to ensure that every last detail of The Venetian Resort was faithful to the original (The Venetian, 2019).

While resorts such as Bellagio, Paris and Luxor mimic a general and broader idea of the locations they replicate, The Venetian's goal is to precisely replicate an actual place.

Conducting this qualitative study, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach that draws both from sociological and hospitality literature. In so doing, we analyzed topics of sociological interest such as the role of authenticity and cultural heritage for today's tourists, trying to understand how The Venetian includes those themes in its marketing strategy. In line with these theoretical and methodological approaches, we investigate the following research questions: How do The Venetian's experience economy-based marketing strategies utilize the concepts of tangible and intangible heritage present in their replicas of elements, such as historic landmarks and traditions? What is the role of authenticity in the creation of a perception of a traditional Italian experience? With an increasing reliance on replicas of foreign and exotic cultural heritage in themed venues in the hospitality and travel sector, this study provides an example of a long-standing, successful use of such themes. With these research questions, we aimed at highlighting the role of experience economy and authenticity approaches in the hospitality industry. Therefore, our paper can serve as a baseline for comparison among resorts that have theming but do not integrate it in the same way, or in general, to other professionals and academics considering themed experiences.

Literature review

The experience economy and authenticity

Pine and Gilmore's (2011) theory on the experience economy has been increasingly implemented as a framework in marketing research (Oh *et al.*, 2007; Atwal and Williams, 2017). The experience economy suggests that businesses should adopt the entertainment-based experience model of theaters and theme parks (Pine and Gilmore (2011)). Thus, in order to deliver valuable and memorable experiences, businesses can create and promote themed environments able to alter guests' sense of reality, especially in terms of space, matter and time (Pine and Gilmore (2011)). Restaurants such as Hard Rock Café and House of Blues, for example, offer entertainment-based settings that Pine and Gilmore (2011) define as *eatertainment*. Similarly, stores like Niketown provide themed events and experience-based activities that fall under the category of *shoppertainment* or *entertailing* (Pine and Gilmore (2011)).

Pine and Gilmore (2011) also analyze customers' engagement, depicting the four dimensions of the experience: passive participation, active participation, absorption, and immersion. Passive participation describes an interaction in which customers do not directly affect the performance, such as concert listeners, while active participation centers on customers personally affecting the event, such as skiers (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Absorption describes situations in which participants' attention is brought from a distance, such as when watching TV. Immersion, meanwhile, occurs when customers become virtually or physically part of an experience, such as playing a videogame.

Analyzing the intersection among the four dimensions, Pine and Gilmore categorize experiences into four broad categories, which they call realms: aesthetics, entertainment, education and escapism. The four realms are created by these axes, as shown in Figure 1 (Pine and Gilmore (2011)). An educational experience takes place when customers are actively physically or mentally engaged, to inform themselves or increase their knowledge. An entertainment experience occurs in a passive way, through consumers' absorption. Taking the example of a tourist standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, Pine and Gilmore (2011) explain how aesthetic experiences take place when "individuals are immersed in an event or environment but have little or no effect on it" (p. 53). Finally, the realm of escapism uncovers an experience that is based on the complete immersion and active involvement of the participant.

Following up on their seminal work on the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (2007) incorporate the concept of authenticity in consumer decision making. Customers' choices depend on "how real they perceive an offering to be," impacting both their behavior and the marketing strategies used to influence that behavior (Pine and Gilmore, 2007, p. 1). Pine and Gilmore (2007) further highlight that factors such as an increasing mistrust towards traditional (e.g. political, educational and religious) institutions and the growth of virtually-mediated interactions, give life to a situation in which consumers are constantly looking for authentic products and experiences. To meet this need businesses try to promote themselves by linking their brands to adjectives such as *genuine*, *real* and *sincere*. This phenomenon occurs at every level of our everyday life, from grocery stores constantly promoting *real* volume shampoos, *real* fruit juices and *authentic* Italian sauces, to media advertising *real* news and *reality* television.

Recently, several works have been written on the relationship between marketing strategies, consumer behavior and authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Lim and Yang, 2016). Fritz *et al.*'s (2017) extensive literature review shows that brand authenticity positively affects brand relationship quality, which is in turn able to influence consumers' behavioral intentions. Analyzing beer brands, Beverland *et al.* (2008) found that advertising influences customers' perceptions of authenticity in a positive way. Similarly, Ilicic and Webster (2016) found that the power of celebrity brand authenticity positively influences consumer intentions to purchase an endorsed brand. One of the sectors that has been influenced the most by the relationship between brand perception and authenticity is the hospitality industry, which often adopts the themed-based models of the experience economy.

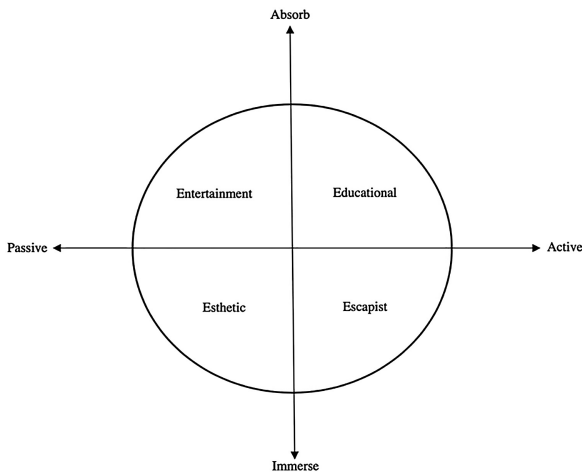


Figure 1.
The experience realms
(Pine and
Gilmore, 2011)

Experience economy and authenticity in the hospitality industry

Many recent hospitality studies on the experience economy have focused on marketing strategies (see, e.g. [Li and Li, 2011](#); [Mainolfi and Marino, 2018](#)) and the idea of customers living positive experiences when travelling ([Hwang and Lee, 2019](#)). In analyzing the tourism market, [Hwang and Han \(2018\)](#) found that the adoption of the experience economy model has a positive influence on the brand prestige. Similarly, [Ketter \(2018\)](#) explored the importance of studying the relationship between the experience economy and destination marketing campaigns. In order to deliver memorable experiences, moreover, the hospitality industry has adopted the so-called theme-park model, as the case of themed restaurants and themed resorts show ([Gottdiener, 1997](#); [Pine and Gilmore, 2011](#)).

Studies on the experience economy within the tourism industry also focus on authenticity, finding that people travel in order to live authentic experiences, and therefore to get to know the real culture and traditions of the destinations ([Hughes, 1995](#); [Johnson, 2007](#); [Lovell and Bull, 2017](#)). [MacCannell \(1973\)](#), proposed the phrase *staged authenticity* to explain that local communities often perform a kind of authenticity that does not reflect reality, but that instead matches tourists' expectations. In past years, the staged authenticity debate largely occupied academic literature, especially in terms of tourists' awareness of staged experiences. Similar to this study, for example, [Chhabra \(2012\)](#) analyzed staged authenticity at the Flora Macdonald Scottish Highland Games held in North Carolina, finding that even when an event is staged in a place far away from the original source of the cultural tradition, tourists can perceive it as authentic.

Additionally, academics study authenticity through the lens of nostalgia, stating that tourists frequently dream of an idealized past that they hope to rediscover while travelling to exotic destinations ([MacCannell, 1976](#); [Urry and Larsen, 2011](#)). Following this idea, resorts may theme themselves in a way that recreates how things were in the past, such as the Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, which celebrates the triumph of the Roman Empire ([Raento and Flusty, 2006](#)). Scholars have also looked at replicas of exotic destinations in Las Vegas' themed resorts, exploring how tourists perceive authenticity in those settings and finding an answer in [Feifer \(1985\)](#) notion of *post-tourists* ([Gottschalk, 1995](#); [Wood, 2005](#)). Feifer uses the term to explain that tourists today "know there is no authentic tourist experience" ([Urry and Larsen, 2011](#), p. 13). Visitors know those attractions are not authentic, yet they specifically enjoy their fakeness ([Wood, 2005](#)).

Cultural heritage as a theme

According to [Schwartz \(2003\)](#), the use of themes for promotion started with Caesars Palace and Circus Circus, both of which "represented a novel use of themes as marketing tools" (p. 136). Replicas of tangible and intangible cultural heritage can play a fundamental role in a themed resort's design and promotional activities, particularly when the theme is based on an historical event or period, just as The Venetian. For the purpose of this manuscript, we use definitions established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) when referring to tangible and intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO defines cultural heritage as "the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations" ([UNESCO 2019](#)). Tangible heritage includes movable cultural heritage (e.g. paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts), immovable cultural heritage (e.g. monuments, archaeological sites) and underwater cultural heritage (e.g. shipwrecks, underwater ruins, cities).

Cultural studies scholars argue that in addition to tangible elements, "heritage is an essential form of symbolic embodiment through which people can construct, reconstruct and communicate their sense of national belonging" ([Park, 2011](#), p. 520). According to [UNESCO](#)

(2019), this intangible heritage “includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as [oral traditions](#), [performing arts](#), [social practices](#), [rituals](#), [festive events](#), knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the [knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts](#).” Literature on cultural heritage replicas has increased in the past years. Analyzing a rock art replica in a cave in France, for example, [Duval et al. \(2019\)](#) focus on the heritage experience in the case of physical 3D copies. Similarly, [Foster and Jones \(2019\)](#) study the replica of the eighth-century St John’s Cross on Iona in Scotland through the lens of authenticity.

Although several scholars have also analyzed the relationship between themed attractions, tangible cultural heritage and the urban environment ([Al, 2017](#); [Franci and Zignani, 2005](#); [Rashed and Hanafi, 2003](#)), there is a lack of scholarship concerning Las Vegas’s themed attractions and the re-creation of intangible cultural heritage as a marketing tool. While some work investigates theme parks and intangible heritage, they mainly focus on local culture. For example, [Massing \(2018\)](#) explores the application of intangible heritage in an ethnic theme park in China that aims to preserve the Chinese Li minority heritage. Other studies analyze the reproduction of cultural heritage within the museum sector, such as [McGlone’s \(2017\)](#) investigation of an exhibition in Washington in which visitors could virtually visit Jerusalem’s historic Church of the Holy Sepulchre. With this study, we fill this gap in literature by investigating how The Venetian Hotel and Casino uses the heritage of another, tourism-focused city (Venice), to promote itself. In other words, we uncover how The Venetian promotes an experience-based tourist involvement that centers on the authenticity of the cultural heritage it replicates.

Methods

To investigate which tangible and intangible cultural heritage-related elements The Venetian uses to market its venue, we conducted content analysis of the resort’s official websites, marketing materials (e.g. customer newsletter) and social media pages. We also analyzed manuscripts, oral history documents and photographs from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries’ Special Collections, to understand if and how the resort used tangible and intangible cultural heritage in promoting itself. The oral history documents selected included interviews with the architects who designed The Venetian and historians who specialize in the development of Las Vegas. A temporal comparison of pictures and postcards guided our investigations on how the resort’s use of cultural heritage changed over time.

We also conducted direct observations, which took place in every public area of the resort, such as the casino spaces, the hotel lobby, the Grand Canal Shoppes (the resort’s mall), dining venues and outside areas (e.g. parking lot, patios, sidewalks and balconies). At the center of our observations were the resort’s architectural features, decorations, signs and artifacts. During these observations, we took pictures and fieldnotes. An increasing number of marketing studies utilize content analysis as a preferred method ([Barahona et al., 2018](#)). The use of qualitative content analysis helped us identify patterns and commonalities within the collected texts, field notes and other qualitative data.

As [Merriam and Grenier \(2019\)](#) explain, as qualitative researchers, we used observations and intuitive understanding acquired from being on the field and, in order to understand our phenomenon from the perspective of the subjects involved, our findings are richly descriptive. We utilized data such as quotes, selections from our fieldnotes and pictures, to use as evidence for our findings ([Merriam and Grenier, 2019](#)). We started with an open coding process, condensing and organizing our data into categories that made sense in terms of our “relevant interests, commitments, literatures, and/or perspectives” ([Lofland et al., 2006](#), p. 201). We saw which key-concepts this process brought to the surface and assigned different labels to each one of them.

Consequently, we conducted focused coding, which [Lofland et al. \(2006\)](#) define as a three-step process that takes place when open coding is well under way and accumulated; uses a selected number of the expanding or more analytically interesting initial codes to knit together larger chunks of data; and uses these expanding materials as the basis for asking more focused and analytic questions (p. 201). This process supported us in comprehending when some of the elaborated codes began “to assume the status of overarching ideas or propositions that will occupy a prominent place in the analysis” ([Lofland et al., 2006](#), p. 201). We then illustrated the codes’ characteristics, variations and exceptions. Using the stronger codes to synthesize this large amount of data, we chose the core categories.

This research was conducted in a sociological framework, using theoretical perspectives common in the discipline of sociology. Following the standard of qualitative sociological work, our results are presented using first person language, which acknowledges the role of the researchers in the research and analysis context. Concerning validity and to address subjectivity concerns, we collected a sufficient amount of additional material (e.g. field notes, text, images) to provide saturation in analysis and provide this information to enable the reader to understand and judge the theoretical and empirical claims made in this study ([Lofland et al., 2006](#)). We also applied a triangulation process to the data, using multiple methods to enhance the validity of the findings ([Merriam and Grenier, 2019](#)). We compared the patterns we found during our on-field observations with other texts, such as pictures, webpages and archived material. Additionally, triangulation was undertaken through inter-rater reliability. Being a co-authored work, this study allowed for the integration of two perspectives, helping avoid the biases and interpretations of a single fieldworker’s standpoint. Thus, we compared research notes, observations and pictures. In terms of internal consistency, moreover, we found it helpful to conduct observations and take research notes multiple times.

Results

Tangible cultural heritage

Promoting Venice’s renaissance. An analysis of The Venetian’s website shows that the resort advertises Venice’s history as if it was intrinsically related to its own history. The elements that are part of Venice’s tangible cultural heritage, especially, are used as physical witnesses of the prestige of the Italian city and therefore contributing to give a sense of authenticity to The Venetian. Our investigations led us to the understanding that descriptions of the city of Venice prevail within the descriptions of the resort’s amenities. In other words, The Venetian’s marketing strategies often seem to promote the city of Venice’s heritage, rather than the resort itself. In this sense, Venice’s heritage is conflated with the resort’s recreation of these elements; The Venetian invites its guests to experience the past of Venice through the physical landmarks it replicates.

The *Art and Architecture* section of The Venetian’s website, for example, hosts a paragraph titled *Renaissance Venice in Las Vegas*, which explains:

Founded in 421 A.D., Venice grew to become the center of a maritime republic and one of the most influential cultural cities in the Mediterranean world. In a brash move to proclaim Venice’s arrival as a city on par with Rome, two Venetian merchants stole the relics of St. Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria in 828 A.D. The relics were received with great ceremony and housed in the newly built Basilica of San Marco in 832. With that, St. Mark had replaced St. Theodore as the patron saint of Venice. By the 16th century, Venice had colonized all of northeastern Italy and held a monopoly over Mediterranean trade. (The Venetian, 2019)

In the same section, we find an explanation of the elements that contribute to make the reputation of Venice famous worldwide and how The Venetian reflects that notoriety:

The frescos that adorn the resort's ceilings were hand painted by famous Italian artists. The Campanile Tower where Galileo demonstrated his new invention of the telescope, St. Mark's Square where the stone columns of patron St. Theodore and the Lion of Venice stand proud and the famed Rialto bridge that has stood the test of time despite critics of its marble structure, these are just a few of the historic sites on display. Inspired by these iconic works, art installations are regularly on property showcasing well-known artists from all over the world. Find your inspiration, discover the allure of The Venetian. (The Venetian, 2019)

Reading the quotes above, we noticed how the resort's artistic features overlap with Venice's. It becomes difficult for the reader to determine which location is being described: Venice or The Venetian.

The website also engages with tangible heritage when highlighting Venice's prestigious past. We found this notion in the descriptions of two key resort attractions. Firstly, the website details its replica of the St. Mark's Bell Tower:

Perhaps the most iconic of all the landmarks of The Venetian Las Vegas, the Campanile Tower has a long and glorious history.

One of the most famous events to take place in the Tower was Galileo demonstrating his new invention, a telescope, to the Doge of Venice.

The first construction of the Campanile Tower began in the ninth century. It was primarily used as a lighthouse for the docks near the Piazzetta. The Campanile Tower was finally completed in the 12th century, at which time the logetta was added to the base of the structure. (The Venetian, 2019)

Secondly, depicting St. Mark's Square, the website explains:

Dive into the history and architecture of the most famous area in Venice, St. Mark's. Few cities, ancient or modern, can claim such distinctive and historically important icons and constructions in such a relatively small area as can Venice, Italy with its St. Mark's Square. The handiwork and artistry of the Venetians of the Renaissance era left no canvas unpainted nor marble unchiseled. And the most remarkable and noteworthy sights of Venice – the Bridge of Sighs, the Campanile Tower, the Rialto Bridge, the Doge's Palace and many others – are replete with intricate and fascinating details that tell the proud story of this ancient site of art, learning and trade. (The Venetian, 2019)

As we understand from these quotes, The Venetian's webpage connects these two famous cultural landmarks to relevant moments that made Venice famous throughout history.

For example, by mentioning that Venice was one of the maritime republics that “had colonized all of northeastern Italy and held a monopoly over Mediterranean trade” (The Venetian, 2019), the website centers on the political and economic power of the Republic of Venice during the Renaissance. In this sense, it is noteworthy to highlight the mention of the Lion of Venice, the symbol of the city, which, according to the website, “stands proud” (The Venetian, 2019) on St. Mark's Bell Tower. The way religious landmarks – such as St. Mark's Basilica and Bell Tower – are portrayed also reflect how Venice affirmed itself as a fundamental religious center throughout the centuries. This aspect is stressed to the point that Venice is depicted “as a city on par with Rome” (The Venetian, 2019), which could lead the user to think of a subtle, but inevitable, comparison with the nearby Caesars Palace, whose theming celebrates the city of Rome and its heritage. The two resorts, in fact, both embrace the tangible cultural heritage that was produced at the height of their relative cities' dominance. That is, in the same way Caesars Palace's theme centers on the Roman Empire age, The Venetian celebrates the Renaissance, during which Venice was at the apex of its power.

In addition to honoring the political and religious success that Venice had throughout history, the descriptions of the replicas of tangible cultural heritage witness the important role of Venice as a center for liberal arts. St. Mark's Bell Tower is depicted as the location

where “Galileo demonstrat[ed] his new invention, a telescope, to the Doge of Venice” (The Venetian, 2019), relating the city’s identity to one of the most important scientific discoveries of all time. In addition to science, architecture and art are the other protagonists of the descriptions on the website, especially in relation to the Renaissance era, which “left no canvas unpainted nor marble unchiseled” (The Venetian, 2019). Centering on the main focus of our paper, these data show that The Venetian’s marketing strategies focus on the promise of an authentic Renaissance Venice experience through the display of cultural tangible heritage.

Venice’s tangible cultural heritage as communication. Our analysis of The Venetian, especially through observation data, led us to the conclusion that the resort’s building itself works as a communication tool. Neon lights and bright signs are some of the elements that make Las Vegas famous all over the world (Al, 2017; Moehring and Green, 2005), advertising to drivers the hotels and casinos along the Strip. Starting from Venturi *et al.*’s book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977), which analyzed the semiotics of architecture in the Nevadan city, several scholars began to argue that the exteriors of the resorts themselves were becoming advertising tools. Al (2017) declares that around the end of the 1950s “[e]ven buildings in Las Vegas, such as the Golden Nugget, had evolved to become pure communication” (p. 101).

When tourists drive or walk by The Venetian, they find themselves surrounded by the replicas of Venice’s most recognizable landmarks. St. Mark’s Bell Tower stands adjacent to the Rialto Bridge (see Figure 2), and the Doge’s Palace faces a reproduction of the Grand Canal with gondolas. The fact that, in just a few square feet, visitors can find all the symbols that made the Italian city famous, helped us reflect on communication strategies.

The Venetian’s geolocation of landmarks is marked by several discrepancies when compared to the locations of the emulated landmarks within the city of Venice. In Venice, for example, the Rialto Bridge and St. Mark’s Bell Tower are not adjacent; they are five kilometers apart. The Grand Canal flows under Venice’s Rialto Bridge, but at The Venetian, the Rialto Bridge leads pedestrians over the road that leads to the resort’s parking garage. The Venetian’s Rialto Bridge also hosts a commemorative plate in Latin, which replicates the original plate on the Rialto Bridge in Venice. Venice’s commemorative plate is dedicated to Pasquale Cicogna, leader of the Republic of Venice from 1,585 to 1,595, while the Venetian’s plate is comprised of a similar wording that presents some linguistic discrepancies, such as missing letters. As we saw in one of the quotes above, The



Figure 2.
The replica of the Rialto Bridge (bottom left) adjacent to the replica of St. Mark’s Bell Tower (right)

Venetian's website glorifies Venice: "Few cities, ancient or modern, can claim such distinctive and historically important icons and constructions in such a relatively small area as can Venice, Italy with its St. Mark's Square" (The Venetian, 2019). It is easy to find in this sentence a subtle comparison with The Venetian itself, which is able to replicate one of the most famous cities in the world within the confines of a single integrated resort property.

In terms of communication, therefore, we can state that replicas of tangible cultural heritage are used to create an experience, rather than for the function it has in Venice. Standing tall on the Strip, the Bell Tower is no longer a religious element, but a resort advertisement that can be seen from a distance. Similarly, The Venetian's Rialto Bridge does not connect the two banks of the Grand Canal, but invites tourists to drive under it to park their cars and visit the resort. Finally, we can agree with the scholars who see the resorts' architecture on the Strip as a tool for communication. Every tourist who is at least slightly familiar with the city of Venice will identify these landmarks, so in using recognizable elements of Venice's heritage, The Venetian's architecture serves as a sign itself to promote a Venice-based experience.

Promoting the Strip experience through the theme. Our analysis revealed that often, replicas of Venice's tangible cultural heritage work as containers for activities and outlets that have nothing to do with Venice, but that are fundamental parts of the Las Vegas Strip integrated-resort experience. These elements included shopping and dining, nightclubs and pools. In other words, in The Venetian, tangible cultural heritage can be defined as a medium for other leisure activities or businesses' advertising. Examples are retail chain signs, such as The Coffee Bean and the Tea Leaf, located beneath Venetian-Renaissance-style arches and frescoes (see Figure 3). Similarly, the TAO Nightclub sign stands adjacent to the replica of the historic clock tower, framed by the Renaissance architecture of the building.

In the previous section we pointed out how, instead of the Grand Canal, it is automobile traffic that flows under The Venetian's Rialto Bridge. While the artery of Venice is the Grand



Figure 3.
The Coffee Bean and
the Tea Leaf shop
framed by
Renaissance-style
architecture

Canal, whose main (and only) means of transportation is boats and ships, the principal corridor of Las Vegas is the Strip, which is populated mainly by cars and buses. We could read this aspect as a comparison between the two cities' means of transportation, with the Rialto Bridge as the merging point.

Between the Rialto Bridge and St. Mark's Bell Tower is Madame Tussauds Wax Museum. This museum, with its wax statues of the most famous celebrities throughout history, also celebrates the relationship between Las Vegas and the entertainment industry via replication spectatorship. Thus, another function of the two most important landmarks of Venice, the Rialto Bridge and St. Mark's Bell Tower, is to be a frame for this known entertainment-based tourist attraction.

In the same way Renaissance-style decorations and buildings host stores and entertainment-related attractions, dining venues at The Venetian are located in strategic areas that recall Venice's urban layout. In the resort's replica of St. Mark's Square, tourists can enjoy Italian restaurants and French coffee shops; throughout the Canal Shoppes, tourists can find restaurants that have little to do with Venice's culinary tradition. Italian-style balconies with a view of the Grand Canal, for example, host venues such as Mexican restaurants and American-style breweries, surrounded by Renaissance-style columns and other artistic elements. Observing the food court, moreover, one thinks of the original St. Mark's Square, with fewer decorations and fast-food restaurants.

Finally, since pools are key elements of the mainstream Strip experience – with every resort on the Strip offering an endless number of pool-related activities – it is noteworthy to focus on the website's description of The Venetian pool, which reads:

Inspired by the Italian Riviera, the pools of The Venetian blend historic beauty with modern delights. With elaborate and lush gardens, the pristine waters of The Venetian pools evoke the charm and irresistible allure of their seaside Italian influences. (The Venetian, 2019)

Although in this case there is no direct mention to the city of Venice, but rather to the Italian Riviera, we noticed how the design and architecture of the pool is promised to create an authentic Italian atmosphere while also offering a “modern delight” experience at the pool.

The representation of Venice's tangible cultural heritage at The Venetian is not only a celebration of the Italian city's glorious past, but also a framework for businesses and activities that are integral parts of the Strip experience but that have nothing to do with Venice or Italy. In the next section, we turn from tangible to intangible heritage elements and focus on the concept of promising tourists an authentic Venice-like experience. Similarly, our analysis led us to the understanding that locating common retail outlets (such as shops and restaurants) inside the replicas of historic buildings and landmarks can be seen as a strategy to make visitors feel an immersive experience that includes both Las Vegas and Venice's traditions.

Intangible cultural heritage

We previously mentioned that, according to [UNESCO \(2019\)](#), intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices and knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. Our analysis on how The Venetian uses Venice's heritage as a promotional tool led us to the understanding that intangible cultural heritage also plays a key role in three main cases: the use of Italian language, the *gondola* tradition and the focus on Italian social practices.

The use of Italian language. Explaining the importance of language in terms of intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO declares:

Constituting an essential part of an ethnic community, mother language is a carrier of values and knowledge, very often used in the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. The

spoken word in mother language is important in the enactment and transmission of virtually all intangible heritage, especially in oral traditions and expressions, songs and most rituals. Using their mother tongue, bearers of specific traditions often use highly specialized sets of terms and expressions, which reveal the intrinsic depth oneness between mother tongue and the intangible cultural heritage. (UNESCO, 2019)

In The Venetian's promotion, the Italian language plays an important role, since it is often used to give a sense of authenticity and closeness to the city of Venice. During our observations and content analysis of on-site resort amenities, we noticed that the city of Venice is always called by its Italian name, *Venezia*: for example, the *Venezia* Tower, which hosts some of the most elegant suites in the resort, the *Venezia* Pool and the *Venezia* Wedding Chapel.

The Venetian's loyalty program, moreover, is called *Grazie*, which means "thanks" in Italian. Players who want to gather information about the program are invited to visit the *Grazie* Desk, located in the casino area. Similarly, the ticket office for the *gondola* rides is called *Emporio di Gondola*, which comes from the Latin *emporium*, signifying an old-Italian name for markets and small businesses. The suites and conference rooms at The Sands Expo – the convention center of The Venetian and Palazzo – also have Italian names. Among the suites, for example, we find *Rialto*, *Piazza* and *Bella*. Likewise, the hallways that host the ballrooms at the Sands Expo are named for historically famous Italians, such as the scientist Galileo and the painters Veronese and Titian, as well as the Venice-adjacent geographical locations of Lido and Murano.

Conducting analysis on the use of Italian language, we noticed that the names used to indicate the various locations are common Italian words, which often people recognize, even if they do not speak Italian. Italian-sounding terms like *grazie* and *bella*, which means beautiful, might also evoke a sense of authenticity for the tourists.

The Gondola experience. One of the oldest traditions of Venice is the skill required to build a *gondola*, which is still transmitted across generations. Embracing this intangible cultural heritage, The Venetian's gondola rides are one of the most famous attractions of the resort. In Venice, the construction of the traditional *gondola* follows a long and ancient process that is still used today. A *gondola* is constituted by eight different kinds of wood, which season from one to two years (Gondola, 2014a, b). In order to give the typical curved shape to the boat, Venetian craftsmen use the heat that comes from burning swamp canes to curve the wood (Gondola, 2014a, b). Every *gondola* is tailored to the weight of the *gondoliere* – the boatman – who commissions it in advance and this feature makes each boat unique.

Although The Venetian's *gondolas* are made of fiberglass and serially produced in a factory in the United States, the resort's website advertises the boats as "authentic Venetian *gondolas*":

No trip to Venice—or The Venetian – would be complete without a graceful and romantic glide down the Grand Canal in an authentic Venetian gondola. Float beneath bridges, beside cafes, under balconies and through the vibrant Venetian streetscape as your singing gondolier[e] sweeps you down the Grand Canal for a ride like no other. (The Venetian, 2019)

The Venetian's welcome email (newsletter) further invites guests to enjoy their "authentic *gondola* rides." As in the case of tangible cultural heritage, the *gondola* ride is promoted as an experience that seems to take place in the city of Venice, rather than at The Venetian.

Gondolas are also important elements in the promotion of The Venetian's wedding packages: the resort offers ceremonies on its Signature White Wedding Gondola (see Figure 4). As we read on the website, couples are promised "an intimate ceremony for two" as the White Gondola "glides along the Grand Canal" (The Venetian, 2019).

The celebration of weddings on white *gondolas*, however, is not part of Venice's tradition. While some couples may celebrate their weddings or anniversaries in Venice on *gondolas*, it is



Figure 4.
The signature white wedding gondola in the Venetian grand canal

not a common practice and the Italian city does not host white *gondolas*. Although centuries ago gondolas were decorated and colorful, scholars note that in the 1600s black became the only color for these boats (Gondola, 2014a, b). Once again, with the Venice-The Venetian overlapping, we understand that what matters in terms of promotion is not having a precise reproduction of the *gondola* – but to recreate an authentic experience. This aspect is reinforced by another important intangible cultural heritage activity, the singing gondolier. Similar to tourists who ride *gondolas* in Venice, The Venetian's guests are promised a complete Venice experience, guided by a gondolier – wearing the traditional striped uniform – who sings famous Italian melodies.

The *gondola* is also present to welcome guests into Grand Canal Shoppes via the Waterfall Atrium. This is one of the oldest existing *gondolas*, imported from Italy, built around 1850, and 36 feet long and 5 feet wide (Jones, 2018). On display since 2017, this original *gondola* is surrounded by panels that show the *gondola* timeline, describing the story of these boats dating back to 1094.

In the previous section, we noted how The Venetian's promotional activities are used as educational tools for users who, browsing the website, receive cultural information on the Italian city. This educational experience is also present for *gondolas*, in the museum-like *gondola* display in the Waterfall Atrium as well as in The Venetian's Gondola University program [1]:

On any day, the most-asked question to a gondolier at The Venetian is, "How can I become a gondolier?" Now, those fans have the opportunity to try – if only for a few hours – through Gondola University. The new program, limited to nine participants per day, shares the "ins and outs" of piloting a gondola. Participants receive a gondola hat and t-shirt, a souvenir photo and a degree certificate from Gondola University. (The Venetian, 2019)

As we previously mentioned, learning the *gondola*-related skills is one of Venice's main traditions in terms of intangible cultural heritage. In the Gondola University activity, tourists are promised to learn first-hand the art of piloting the boat, having the unique experience to be part of a centuries-old tradition. Differently from the tangible cultural heritage, where physical landmarks are the main protagonists, we noticed how the Gondola University is

promoted to make tourists the principal subject of the activity. In other words, in the *gondola* case, the intangible cultural heritage experience can happen only if the tourists experience it.

Experiencing Italian social practices. During our analysis of promotional material and observations, we noticed the importance of Italian social practices in the promotion of the resort's experience. In this analysis, we followed UNESCO's definition of social practices:

Social practices, rituals and festive events are habitual activities that structure the lives of communities and groups and that are shared by and relevant to many of their members. They are significant because they reaffirm the identity of those who practise them as a group or a society and, whether performed in public or private, are closely linked to important events. [...] They are closely linked to a community's worldview and perception of its own history and memory. They vary from small gatherings to large-scale social celebrations and commemorations. Each of these sub-domains is vast but there is also a great deal of overlap between them. (UNESCO, 2019)

Guests browsing The Venetian's website may find familiarity with the Italian word *piazza*, which means "square." The Venetian's website homepage reads: "The Venetian tower is our piazza: the bustling epicenter and the beating heart of the resort. Take in the beauty of old world Italy while you enjoy all the comforts and excitement of modern day Las Vegas" (The Venetian, 2019). Tourists who have some knowledge of Italy might recognize that the term *piazza* is fundamental for social interaction in Italian culture, being the administrative, economic and religious center of every Italian city. Reading that The Venetian tower is defined as the resort's *piazza*, tourists understand the fundamental role that The Venetian tower has for the resort and the historical significance it refers to.

The Venetian's food and beverage offerings also blend intangible social practices with the tangible heritage present at the resort. Food is a big part of Italian culture; Italians often refer to food as a way of life. The Venetian's Bellini Bar is named after one of the most traditional Venetian cocktails and offers "stylish fixtures inspired by Italy" (The Venetian, 2019). The restaurant Mercato della Pescheria is described as combining "the proud heritage of an Italian seafood market combined with great service and restaurant style seating" (The Venetian, 2019). Seafood markets are another important tradition of Italian cities located on the sea, like Venice, recalling, once again, a social practice that is a fundamental part of some Italian urban settings. The restaurant Casanova also promises that customers will experience the "casual charm you'd expect from the Italian coast" (The Venetian, 2019).

The Venetian's marketing strategies focus on social practices by juxtaposing representations of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. If we take the above quotes on the resort's restaurants, for example, we understand that these locations, together with the promise of an authentic Italian atmosphere, offer a unique Venice experience. Tourists can eat "outside" – though they are seated under a fake sky – looking at the canals while enjoying the *piazza*, as happens when tourists visit Venice. Like Italian locals, they can stroll around the tiny streets and squares listening to famous Italian songs sung by the gondoliers or the performers situated in the (reproduction of) St. Mark's Square. And like Venice's residents, they can enjoy a Bellini cocktail or typical food while observing Italian-style decorations and people walking around in the *piazza*.

We find the promise of an authentic Venice and, more generally, Italian experience in the case of weddings. In addition to the wedding experience with the *gondola*, The Venetian offers wedding packages that will "let you surround yourself in the elegance of old world Italy and awe-inspiring open venues, providing the perfect backdrop to the wedding of your dreams" (The Venetian, 2019). Throughout the online brochure that describes these wedding packages, we find suggestions of a Venice lifestyle:

Celebrate your love with a kiss on a bridge that overlooks the Grand Canal amid the sights and sounds of the bustling St. Mark's Square. Take in the open-air setting that's filled with singing gondoliers, one-of-a-kind boutiques and courtyard cafés. (The Venetian, 2019)

It is easy to understand how The Venetian's wedding promotion centers, once again, on Italian social practices and authenticity, wherein first-hand experiences play a fundamental role. These activities would not be possible without the participation of guests, who by eating, drinking and strolling along the canals become the protagonists of a real Venice-lifestyle experience.

Conclusions

One of the main contributions of this research is its multidisciplinary nature, since we aim at providing a foundation for additional case studies or comparative studies in the use of authenticity both from a sociological and hospitality point of view. In so doing, we aim at translating a sociological approach based on theoretical concepts, such as authenticity and cultural heritage, to tourism and hospitality research audience. The main point of this discussion is to answer our research questions by understanding how tangible and intangible heritage – through the experience economy and authenticity – apply to resorts marketing. Although we are aware that theme resorts are not peculiar to Las Vegas, throughout the manuscript, we argue that The Venetian represents a unique case study, especially compared to other themed-resorts that have a more general theme. Moreover, in terms of advancement in the industry, this research should allow other resorts that do not have this sort of location-based theming to look at how the experience is promoted and consider how that might then relate to what they do. This is particularly important if we consider those resorts that would like to differentiate themselves in conditions of market saturation or concentration, as it happens in Las Vegas.

The Venetian's promotion of Venice's tangible and intangible cultural heritage is strongly intertwined with the two main frames of this study: the experience economy and authenticity. Looking at [Pine and Gilmore \(2011\)](#) four realms of the experience, we noticed that our case study addresses the escapism and immersion realms, with a limited involvement of the education realm (see [Figure 5](#)). Interestingly, we did not find a strong connection between The Venetian promotion strategy and the realm of entertainment, in which individuals are involved in a mere passive way. At first sight, one might think that the marketing strategies based on teaching and learning, for example, could be a passive experience, wherein customers inactively learn about historic facts and other artifact descriptions on the resort's website. However, we observed that visitors' learning happens mainly through immersion,

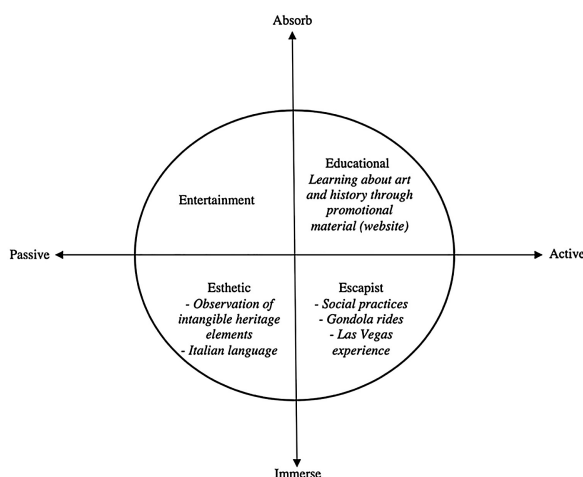


Figure 5.
The experience realms
(Pine and Gilmore,
2011) applied to The
Venetian case study

rather than absorption. Learning, therefore, becomes an active – rather than passive – experience.

As Pine and Gilmore (2011) explain, to stage experiences means to engage the customers, rather than simply entertain them. This strategy is fundamental for companies that want to create unforgettable experiences. According to the two scholars, in fact, although companies' offering involves entertaining activities, it is necessary for them to work on the other experiential realms. In other words, it is The Venetian's website itself that constantly invites guests to be at the center of the action, becoming active protagonists of the experience. In this sense our results suggested that replicating intangible cultural heritage is a reliable customer engagement strategy. Several themed resorts in Las Vegas reproduce physical landmarks – such as the Luxor's pyramid or the Paris's Eiffel Tower – copying recognizable elements of tangible cultural heritage. The Venetian extends this practice to offer an immersive experience in which guests not only visit reproduced landmarks, but are promised to live the authentic Italian lifestyle. From the Italian-sounding voices of the gondoliers to the concept of eating in the piazza, a visit to The Venetian means active engagement in the social practices of the location it replicates. With today's themed-resorts increasingly interested in promoting authentic experiences, our findings show that a key-strategy for this practice is to go beyond the copy of physical places and expand the experience to include cultural practices.

Within Pine and Gilmore (2011) matrix, education takes place through absorption, where people's attention is brought to the mind from a distance, such as when watching TV. This could be the case of users reading information on The Venetian's website when they are at home, planning their visit to the resort. The education realm actively engages consumers' minds and our analysis shows that The Venetian encourages its user to be actively involved in its "Venetian" heritage while navigating the resort's website. This happens through an invitation to click on a link to uncover more information about Venice Renaissance, to reserve a table in an Italian-style restaurant, or to book one of the beautifully decorated suites (see, e.g. The Venetian, 2019).

As can be seen in Figure 5, the opposite side of the absorption axis is immersion. It is through immersion that we found the majority of The Venetian's experiences taking place. The realms of the experience that happen through immersion are escapist and aesthetic. We found that the intangible-heritage activities at The Venetian are related to escapism, which is based on the complete immersion and active involvement of the participants. This is the case of Italian cultural practices and the *gondola* rides, where the experience that is promoted cannot take place without tourists' active involvement. Visitors can live the authentic Italian lifestyle, for example, by dining in one of the restaurants in the piazza or strolling along the canals. Similarly, to live the authentic *gondola* experience, guests have to ride the boat and learn about this ancient tradition. Visitors, in this way, not only become part of those cultural practices, but they collaborate in their production and consolidation. We also found escapism in the advertised promise that at The Venetian, visitors can be part of the authentic Strip experience – which we will further develop in this section – in which visitors are proposed several kinds of immersive activities, such as pools, nightclubs and weddings.

The third realm we encountered through data analysis is the aesthetic, involving an immersion of individuals in an event or environment but without them having an effect on it. The two resort elements best representing the aesthetic realm are the replicas of intangible heritage and the use of Italian language. When visitors observe replicas of landmarks and read material that uses Italian words, they do not have an influence on the environment. It would not be correct, however, to strictly declare that these actions are completely passive. Visitors are not only absorbed in the environment, since they are completely immersed in The Venetian experience, which blends together elements such as monument replicas, cultural practices and learning strategies.

If, on the one hand, an analysis of the four realms at The Venetian, shows that the resort's marketing strategy aims at actively involve its guests, on the other hand, we notice how the

matrix relates to authenticity. Investigating Pine and Gilmore's realms, we observed that the promotion of authenticity is key in The Venetian's marketing activities, especially through advertising of cultural heritage and the authentic Strip experience. The first tool that promotes authenticity in the resort are the descriptions on the website, which enhance a constant overlapping between the real and the replicas. What The Venetian aims to recall while describing its replicas of tangible cultural heritage is not the city of Venice how tourists see it today, but the city's past as one of the most important locations in the Old World for numerous disciplines, such as art and religion. Describing Venice's historic events (e.g. Venice being one of the maritime republics and its monopoly over Mediterranean trade) that made Venice "one of the most influential cultural cities in the Mediterranean," the website helps the user understand – with concrete facts – the importance of the city that inspired the resort (The Venetian, 2019). It is noteworthy to reflect on the fact that tourists who visit Venice today have a 21st century-experience of the city, rather than a Renaissance one. Paradoxically, it might seem that The Venetian claims to offer an authentic Renaissance experience that cannot even be found in the original location today.

We therefore found that the descriptions related to the city prevail over the descriptions of the resort. By connecting The Venetian's architecture to the original tangible cultural heritage in Venice, the resort promises unique themed experiences. This strategy is even clearer in the case of intangible cultural heritage, where visitors are invited to actively become part of the authentic experience themselves. In the case of Italian language, our findings show that it is used in a way that is similar to the replicas of tangible cultural heritage. The use of Italian-sounding names, for example, helps reinforce the genuineness and authenticity of The Venetian.

Finally, The Venetian's marketing strategy often uses the promotion of theme-based authentic intangible experiences. Although elements such as the descriptions of the rooms, the casino's gambling offering and dining options occupy an important part of the resort's promotion, what seems to prevail is the goal of advertising and promising an original experience that blends Venice's and Las Vegas' culture together. This aspect is noteworthy, especially with tangible cultural heritage working as a frame for other kinds of venues that are part of the Venetian's Las Vegas Strip experience, such as retail chains and ethnic restaurants, which have little to do with Venice. Although these businesses are related to the Strip culture, rather than Italian culture, the fact that they are surrounded by Renaissance-style decorations helps them blend into the authenticity of the resort.

Ritzer and Stillman (2001) describe how in themed Las Vegas resorts, the past, the present and the future coexist at the same time. As we showed in our findings, the promotion of Venice's tangible cultural heritage represents a balanced blending between the Venice-style container and the elements of Las Vegas culture, such as nightclubs, stores and dining venues. In this study, we highlight how through advertising of intangible cultural heritage related elements, especially in the case of social practices, the resort promotes its shopping and dining venues. The notion of authenticity, once again, becomes fundamental to The Venetian's embrace of the experience economy, especially when we recognize that The Venetian does not promote its own authenticity, but the authenticity of a location on the other side of the world.

Note

1. Per phone communication with The Venetian's customer service on 21 August, 2019, Gondola University is on indefinite hiatus, though it still appears on the resort's website as of manuscript writing.

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