Perceived Authenticity

A Tourist and Service Provider Perspective
in the Belgian Ardennes

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Abstract

How does perceived authenticity of tourists meet perceived authenticity of service providers on marketing content? Authenticity and marketing are both topics of importance within the tourism industry. Authenticity is a concept which is still being discussed by scholars due to the complexity and ambiguity of defining and conceptualizing it. Marketing is also a concept which is complex to conceptualize due to the complexity to define it and the changes in trends, lifestyles, technologies, etc., of consumers and service providers. In the tourism research field, these two concepts have already been related to one another to have a better understanding of how authenticity is used or perceived on marketing content. When relating these two concepts, the perspective of tourists or service providers is often taken. There is however not often been research done on comparing how tourists perceive authenticity in marketing content made by service providers. In order to start the discussion, this study focusses on a small area of the Belgian Ardennes named *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* This has been done through the use of interviews made with tourists and service providers at the destination, and an additional interview with the tourism promotion office of the region. This qualitative study is relevant due to its contribution to the theoretical conceptualization of the concept of authenticity and its use in marketing content. It is also relevant due to its contribution to the development of the concept of authenticity, especially in marketing content for the Belgian Ardennes.

Keywords: perceived authenticity, marketing, service providers, tourists, experiences, Belgian Ardennes.

Cover photo made by Sarah-Maria Geradin (2018). Image of an open-field in Filly, Belgium.

Note: This report uses images to illustrate comments made by interviewees. Several pictures used have been made by Sarah-Maria Geradin (2018) and when this is not the case, the original photograph is referenced. These images help the reader visualize what the interviewees are discussing during the interviews, it is therefore important to see these images in color for a better reading.

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1. Introduction

Selling experiences isn't a new business (Boswijk, Peelen, & Olthof, 2011). The Romans were already combining monetary exchange for experiences and this hasn't stopped, it only became more important in the tourism industry. Pine and Gilmore (1999) refer to experiences as a new way of creating value, different from goods or services. Experiences have a more personal and unique touch to it than do services and goods. This is what the tourism industry has been building on for the last decades: the 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). One type of experience that has been discussed in the field of tourism research for decades already is that of the 'authentic experience'. Not only is it thoroughly discussed amongst researches, it is also praised by numerous tourists and used by numerous destinations.

In a general sense, authenticity refers to what is original and genuine, of disputed origin, which is accurate or reliable, or which resembles an original ("authentic", 2018). This is the definition which forms the way the word is used in different fields such as philosophy, psychology, arts, cultural studies, marketing, but also in tourism (Lovell & Bull, 2018). Austin's (1964) explanation of word use in different situations says that the word authenticity can have several definitions and can be used in different ways depending on the situation and the person using the word (Austin, 1964), making the concept more complex. Due to this complexity in defining the word, it is important to get a better understanding of the way the main stakeholders of the tourism industry understand the concept of 'authenticity'.

These stakeholders are tourists, who consume 'authenticity', and service providers, who produce and sell 'authenticity' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Additionally, because a destination constitutes itself of mainly smaller service providers (Pike, 2018), this study focusses on smaller businesses from the tourism industry producing and selling 'authenticity'. Service providers and tourists meet in different ways and one of them is through marketing (Lohmann & Panosso Netto, 2017). Marketing is the way service providers will attempt to promote and sell their service to tourists ("marketing", 2018). Often supported by different types of media, the way service providers apply strategies in their marketing content will influence the expectations and experiences of tourists (Kolb, 2017). Several ways through which authenticity has been understood by these two important stakeholders so far is by referring to traditions and origins as explained by Beverland and al. (2008). It can also refer to the trustworthiness of marketing content as discussed by Echtner and Prasad (2003). Peterson (2005) refers to authenticity as a relation to traditions and traditional tourism products and practices. These are only several ways of understanding the concept and it is, therefore, relevant to have a better understanding of who perceives it how, when and where.

As answering these questions goes beyond the scope of this study and has been tried by many researchers already, this study looks at how the most important stakeholders at a destination relate to the concept and how each one's perspective finally meets and eventually matches. Service providers and tourists each perceive authenticity in a specific way based on their beliefs, perspectives, meanings, values and implication at a destination (Zhou & al., 2015). Understanding whether these two perspective match at a destination is important as this influences whether tourist will have an authentic experience and

whether the service provider will maintain or improve its reputation as authentic or not (Martine-Roig, 2015). This is also true for the destination as a whole (Marine-Roig, 2015).

This study aims at interpreting the relation between tourists' perceived authenticity of marketing content and the use of authenticity on marketing content by service providers. This is done in a small region in the Belgian Ardennes, *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* where the concept of authenticity has been relevant for quite some time. Despite the concept being relevant, not every stakeholder seems to be in line with it. This study aims at understanding the relationship between tourists and service providers, each's perceived authenticity and how each perceived authenticity meets in relation to marketing content at the destination.

1.1.   Problem Statement

The concepts of marketing and authenticity are topics which have received important attention in the tourism field research, such as Britton (1979), Echtner and Prasad (2003) and Silver (1993) who already combined both concepts in their research. These concepts have however seen many changes over the last decades because of the digitalization of tourism, but also because of the changes in tourists and tourists expectations, experiences, behavior, etc. Due to these changes, the topic is still discussed in the tourism research field such as by Beverland and Lindgreen (2008), Pine and Gilmore (2012) and Reisinger and Steiner (2006) who discuss the combination of marketing and authenticity in a more recent context. Despite the research already done, there are still knowledge gaps in how each, tourists and service providers, perceive authenticity and how these two perspectives match or not for a destination or for an experience. This study is relevant because it can help to add knowledge to the theoretical conceptualization of the concept of authenticity, but also to the practical knowledge existing about marketing and marketing strategies of service providers. Therefore, the main research question this study aims to answer is "Does the way service providers perceive and use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content on media match tourists' perceived authenticity?". As there is little research done on combining the concepts of perceived authenticity, marketing content and the stakeholders (tourists and service providers), the following literature review is constructed based on this knowledge gap.

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2. Literature Review and Relevance

The following literature review is based on the problem identification from the previous chapter. It summarizes relevant work which has been done on the different concepts of 'perceived authenticity' and 'marketing' and work which has been done on both of these concepts in relation to one another. As 'service providers' and 'tourists' are also important concepts, relevant work which includes one or both stakeholders in relation to the two first concepts will also be used in this literature review. The literature reviewed in this chapter is used later in this study in order to make sense of the data collected during the interviews and the desk research. The second section of this chapter discusses the relevance of this study for both the theoretical and the societal level. The relevance section looks at where the knowledge gaps are and how this study can contribute in a meaningful way to reduce these gaps.

2.1. Tourism and Experiences

Boswijk, Peelen, and Olthof (2011) explain that the emergence of the experience economy is mostly driven by the commodification of products. There where competition is high, the diversification of products and services is becoming more complicated. This leads to commodification, and commodification tends to decrease value creation. This is where the development of experiences comes in as it offers something "different", "unique", "personal", and "unreproducible" to some extent. For these characteristics, the value creation increases. As the authors add to this information, the consumption of experiences is not for all consumers relevant. In the current economy, society has moved from searching for experiences towards an economy of meanings and this is due to a certain extent by globalization, the interconnectedness of people, a change in life-styles and the possibility to have different lifestyles, technology development, and innovations, etc. Consumers become more active in the creation of their own experiences, combining the meanings of themselves and others. This change in the economy pushes companies to adapt to the demand and change their practices and products (Boswijk, Peelen, & Olthof, 2012).

O'Dell and Billing (2005) explain how experiences are personal, subjective, fleeting and continuously on-going. These experiences exist through the interaction of the supply side and the meaning given by the demand side (O'Dell & Billing, 2005). While there are several elements which are important in the creation and the maintaining of an experience, the involvement of the service provider is determinant in providing the experience to the client. This is because they are the ones setting-up the circumstances and the context for the experience to happen (Weiler & Walker, 2014).

MacCannell (1976) has played an important role in discussing the way experiences are provided by locals and service providers at the destination. As tourists seek for 'real' or 'authentic' experiences to escape their own routines, they try to come as close as possible of the 'real' life of people from another culture or country. Tourists still want to see 'real authenticity' and this is why service providers make sure to meet their demand (MacCannell, 1976). Their relationship is thus very important. The service provider enhances the experience lived by tourists in a real-time experience and authenticity becomes an outcome of the involvement in this real-time experience if the service provider permits it (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

2.2.   Authenticity

The concept of authenticity has been discussed in the tourism research field by many researchers such as by Boorstin (1961), MacCannell (1973), Wang (1999), etc., but the concept is contested and always changing. Focusing on the concept in the tourism field started mainly in the 60's and has since grown to provide a large amount of literature. Boorstin (1961) suggested that mass tourism tourists are actually not searching for authenticity, and are satisfied with a commodified version of it. This is because tourists are interested in learning about the "other", but want to keep a certain level of protection and comfort from the hosts. MacCannell (1973) explains that tourists are motivated by their desire and aspiration to find authentic places, but that this quest is more complicated than it seems. Tourists leave their routines at home in order to find authenticity elsewhere. Often the distinction made by tourists is that of the modern and the primitive. Due to the process of commodification which came with the industrialization of tourism, it is not possible to find authenticity, but only inauthenticity or staged authenticity. The reason tourists can't find the "real authenticity" is because of the relations in the tourism industry and not because of their search for the inauthentic (MacCannell, 1973). These two views simplify authenticity, while authenticity is much more complex.

Other scholars decide to take different approaches and start categorizing the concept of authenticity. Cohen and Cohen (2012) explain that more recent authors propose to abandon the search for "authenticity" to instead focus on the process of authentication. Cohen and Cohen (2012) define authentication as a process of confirming whether something is real, trustworthy, original, etc. They discuss two modes of authentication: hot and cold. Cool authentication refers to often a formal and official act or person saying that something is real or original. Hot authentication refers to an informal and subjective way of authenticating something or an experience. It is based on belief and emotions instead of on "reality" and "truth". It is socially produced and the more people believe in it, the more importance it will receive. That these two processes seem very different does not exclude the fact that they are co-constructing. Authentication can thus be based on cold authentication, but amplified by hot authentication (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

Wang (1999) takes another approach and suggests that there are three different ways of categorizing authenticity. There is objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity relates to what is original and the authenticity in such case can be measured by absolute and objective criteria. This is what Cohen and Cohen (2012) would refer to as 'cold authentication'. So it is possible for that what is perceived as authentic by tourists to be disregarded as such by an authority. Constructed authenticity refers to an authenticity, which is culturally constructed by point of views, beliefs, perspectives, expectations, etc. It is thus subjective and symbolic, the tourist's perception of authenticity is thus "socially constructed and individually negotiated". Cohen and Cohen would refer to this as 'hot authentication' (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Constructed authenticity has also been divided into two categories: indexical authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) and iconic authenticity (Casteran & Roederer, 2013). Indexical authenticity refers to recognizing several elements which do fit to what is original, while iconic authenticity refers to recognizing several elements which do fit expectations tourists have of what is original. Wang (1999) also introduces as a new category 'existential authenticity'

which is referred to as a state of being. It is activity related, as it is the activity which activates feelings and perception within tourists (Wang, 1999).

Later on, Reisinger and Steiner (2006) explain that it is existential authenticity which is most useful to describe the way tourists make sense of their experiences. Belhassen and al. (2008) add that keeping in mind the way people make sense of things is still based on physical objects and the characteristics attached to it are the base for meanings to exists. These meanings are consequently the base on which people make sense of their experiences (Belhassen & al., 2008).

2.3.   Perceived Authenticity

More modern authors suggest that tourists give more importance to authenticity from their emotional experiences instead of from definitions and facts (Jensen & Lindberg, 2001). Peterson adds that authenticity is in a constant state of flux, constantly socially constructed depending on the person (Peterson, 2005). This is what 'perceived authenticity' refers to.

In their book, Kozak and Woodside (2014) define tourist perception as the interpretation, identifying, categorizing, naming and associating from one "object" with another one. 'Perception' is directing the attention to that what is interpreted, identified, categorized, etc. This can occur unconsciously, as well as consciously. Perception and assessment are thus human constructs (Kozak & Woodside, 2014). Keenan (2015) adds to this information that perception is built upon ideas created in individuals' minds, but also on the context, personal experiences and expectations (Keenan, 2015). Perception is a concept which is relevant to tourism research, but also in research on authenticity. Asplet and Cooper (2000) explain that the perception of what is authentic depends on a person's preferences, beliefs, experiences, and expectations. Taylor (2001) says that today, something being called *authentic* mainly refers to a feeling of rightness instead of *real*. Chhabra (2005) adds that variations within definitions and determinants of authenticity exist and need to be considered, but that from a broader perspective, these meanings can refer to a wider common understanding at a destination (Chhabra, 2005).

Perceived authenticity from the tourists' perspective has been discussed by Cohen and Avieli (2004) where they explain that the modern tourist focusses less on the search for what is original and more on the way he feels. Xie and Wall (2002) add that tourists' perception of authenticity is influenced by their expectations. These expectations can be built on the way a destination or service is perceived in images or texts, or through other means. Zhou and al. (2015) discuss host perception of authenticity as founded in a commercialized environment and which is based on the way hosts relate and especially negotiate with other stakeholders at the destination. Hosts also include beliefs and knowledge about their place in their perception of authenticity (Zhou and al., 2015). It is thus important to better understand how they authenticate the destination they live at, as this is how they will promote the destination and if applicable, their business or service provided.

Marine-Roig (2015) goes on by explaining that authenticity is only relevant when it relates to the person perceiving it. While many different stakeholders have an idea of what authenticity means, only a few stakeholders are going to relate to it directly. The local population and service providers are important as they will be 'meeting' the demand of tourists. Their view on what authenticity is influences the image of a destination and the service they will provide. As the ones who are supposed to perceive authenticity

are tourists, the way they perceive authenticity is the important one. Tourists interpret the elements used by service providers to market the service they provide and relate these elements in relation to themselves. This process influences the image of the destination (Marine-Roig, 2015) and will influence the image a service provider attempts to portray.

Chhabra (2003) studied how there are several elements present at a destination which influence the tourist's perception of authenticity. These elements are food, dancing, and souvenirs, if one of these elements is not perceived, this does not necessarily affect the total image of authenticity perceived by tourists. Mura and Lovelock (2009) add architecture to these elements. These elements are to some extent linked to the destination and can vary amongst places. To what extent is this the case at another destination where authenticity is also an important concept for tourism? The authors add that there are several elements which do also participate in the perception of authenticity by locals (Mura & Lovelock, 2009). It is therefore interesting to see whether these are the same as tourists.

These authors have discussed how each stakeholder's perception of authenticity is important but does not actually say whether service providers' perception meets tourists perception at a destination.

2.4.   Marketing and Tourism

Service providers use the concept of 'authenticity' in their business or service provided as this is very important to meet the demand. They do so through marketing. Just as defining or positioning 'authenticity' marketing is a complex concept to define and theorize (Kolb, 2017). McDonald (2009) explains that a large number of definitions of marketing are interesting for theoretical purposes, but are complicating the practical use of these definitions. This results in confusion and ambiguity on the definition of the concept, especially for the practical world. As Wilkie & Moore (2012) explain, the definition of the American Marketing Association has undergone many changes to today become "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (American Marketing Association, 2018). This definition of marketing will be used for this study as the perspective it takes comes close to the organizational and managerial perspective which is relevant for service providers. Marketing is often associated with specific elements such as the 4P's (product, place, price, and promotion), but in the case of tourism, more elements need to be added due to its complexity (service, time, process, etc.) (Lohmann & Panosso Netto, 2017). As mentioned previously the supply side takes part in the creation of authentic experiences and apply it in the service they provide or the business they have.

However, this is not the only way service providers communicate the concept of authenticity with tourists. Service providers can also use the concept in their promotion strategies (Pike, 2018). Promotion is done by informing, persuading and reminding tourists. This is the most visible process within marketing and is the one that will spread the image of the business, it needs to be believable (Pike, 2018). Pike lists several approaches to promote a business ranging from advertisement, sales, personal selling, mailing, the point of sale, brochures, expositions, etc. (Pike, 2018). These are various approaches which can be mixed or not, and which need a media support type to support the promotion. These media can be rather traditional such as the television, newspapers, radio, magazines, outdoor advertising, word to mouth, mailing supports such as emails, text messages or post, brochures such as catalogs, flyers, booklets, and

coupons. It can also be digital such as text, photos, graphics, audio and video which can be placed and used on the internet where several online promotional platforms are available (Pike, 2018).

Kolb (2017) adds to this information that marketing can also be used to change or reinforce expectations tourists might have of a destination or a service. Service providers need to meet the demand of tourists in order for marketing to be successful. The image a service provider uses for marketing needs to be tailored to suit the tourist demand, but also needs to suit the actual service provided. Digital media make it easier for such inconsistencies to be denounced on the internet (on websites or social media platforms). It permits tourists to share the experiences they lived with other tourists and service providers through reviewing a business, service or region. This plays an important role in the marketing of a service provider as it can affect its effectivity and the image the business portrays. The author goes further by explaining how this is complicated when wanting to promote 'authenticity' as the concept is very subjective and its meaning changes constantly (Kolb, 2017).

2.5.   Marketing and Authenticity

The concept of authenticity has its importance in marketing. Taylor's study (2001) refers to authenticity as a key reason for tourist to choose a destination. As Chhabra (2005) adds, most of the research done from the supplier side and authenticity focusses on how the supply side packages and sells 'authenticity' at the destination. The author adds that their perception of authenticity is of importance as it influences the way the concept will be used in marketing in order to meet tourist demand (Chhabra, 2005).

Echtner and Prasad (2003) show how the concept of 'authenticity' has been used for already quite some time by the tourism industry. This is often in order to represent a stereotype or expectation the tourist has of a specific destination or its population (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Although it seems that tourists are today becoming more and more aware of these marketing processes, they still pay a lot of importance to the way a destination is branded as authentic and whether this is really the case at the destination (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Silver (1993)'s discussion about authenticity in marketing adds that it is often the symbols and signs which do refer to authenticity, or the idea of authenticity, that are used in marketing content. It is thus not necessarily based on what is true or original, but mainly on the stereotypes people have (Silver, 1993).

Pine and Gilmore (2007) go on by explaining that it is important for a business to be able to create and maintain authenticity. This is because tourists are more and more basing their destination choices on authenticity. Therefore, the concept should be used implicitly in marketing strategies. The authors add that when referring directly to being 'authentic' in marketing content, the content already loses its authenticity. Therefore, the concept should be implicit and based on the perception of tourists (Pine & Gilmore, 2007). Pine and Gilmore suggest that businesses can create or implement authenticity by combining environmental elements with what will stimulate the perception of authenticity within tourists (Pine & Gilmore, 2007).

Beverland and Luxton (2005) add to this that the use of actual marketing strategies such as advertisement and sales do result as well in a potential loss of authenticity in the image of the business. Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2008) add that advertisement does reinforce the image people can have

of authenticity, but that people deal in their own way with the image of authenticity they have. Those viewing authenticity in advertisement do it based on their own norms, but it occurs that they perceive something as authentic even if this is not the case (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). This is important to keep in mind as the objective of marketing is to meet the tourist demand. As Kolb (2017) mentions, if the expectation they have does not match the actual experience they live, tourists live a disappointing experience. Authenticity in marketing is thus a strategic construct which adds value when well used in marketing (Kolb, 2017).

2.6.   Relevance

This research is relevant in several domains, namely on the scientific level. An important amount of research and studies have been done on the concept of authenticity such as that of Wang (1999), Cohen and Cohen (2012), Grayson and Martinec (2004), etc., and the way it is being perceived by tourists. Marine-Roig (2015) links the two stakeholders and their perception of authenticity but does not discuss how each perception matches or not. This study contributes by adding information on this knowledge gap between perceived authenticity of tourists and perceived authenticity of service providers and starts the discussion about the extent to which each perspective matches the other.

Just as 'authenticity', 'marketing' is a thoroughly researched field with some of the most recent authors such as Lohmann and Panosso Netto (2014), Kolb (2017) and Pike (2018). The concept of 'authenticity' has also been applied to the marketing research field such as Pine and Gilmore (2007) who accentuate the importance of the concept in marketing for service providers. Also, researchers such as Echtner and Prasad (2003) have looked at the influence of the concept in marketing content on tourists' perception of authenticity and the effect on the destination and its population. There are, however, no researches yet looking directly at the relationship between perceived authenticity of tourists and service providers and how each perspective matches in marketing content. This study contributes by starting the discussion on how service provider's perceived authenticity used in marketing content matches perceived authenticity of tourists.

This study focuses on a touristic area in the south of Belgium named *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* where the concept of authenticity has been part of the promotional discourse for the last two decades. This is due to a study done by several experts for the Federation du Tourisme en Luxembourg Belge (FTLB) (the tourism promotion office) (CoManaging, 2010), who have attempted to understand how to implement the concept of 'authenticity' in their marketing content. As there is knowledge about how the region promotes itself as authentic, there is, however, no knowledge yet about how service providers relate to the concept of authenticity, whether in their business or in their marketing content. Other researches have been done such as statistical studies (Commissariat Général au Tourisme, 2017), marketing studies (CoManaging, 2010), etc., but none of these studies look at whether marketing content of service providers matches the perceived authenticity of tourists. There are also no studies which research tourist behavior and perception of authenticity in the Belgian Ardennes.

From a societal point of view, this study contributes by adding knowledge on the use of the concept of authenticity by service providers in their business and in their marketing content for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* It also contributes to a better understanding of the tourist's perception of

authenticity in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* but also their perception of the area in general. The knowledge this study provides can be used by service providers in order to better understand the concept and whether they can and how they can use the concept in their own business and marketing content in order to meet the tourist demand. The knowledge gained about perceived authenticity by tourists and service providers can also help the FTLB adapt or improve their marketing content in order to meet the tourist demand, but also to better understand how service providers relate to the region and the concept.

This is why the goal of this thesis is to add additional knowledge to the work done by researches such as Grayson and Martinec (2004), Marine-Roig (2015), Pine and Gilmore (2007), Echtner and Prasad (2003) and to start a discussion on how perceived authenticity of both stakeholders matches on marketing content of service providers. The outcome of this study can help understand better how service providers of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* relate to their region, the concept of authenticity and how these aspects come back in their marketing content.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The literature review has led to identifying the main concepts of 'perceived authenticity', 'marketing', 'service providers' and 'tourists' and how each relates to one another. The following chapter relates these concepts to one another in a conceptual framework (image 1). The conceptual framework permits the identification of sub-questions which, consequently, help to answer the main research question of this study. The main research question is:

"Does the way service providers perceive and use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content on media match tourists' perceived authenticity?"

3.1. Conceptual Framework

Image 1: Conceptual framework with relevant concepts.
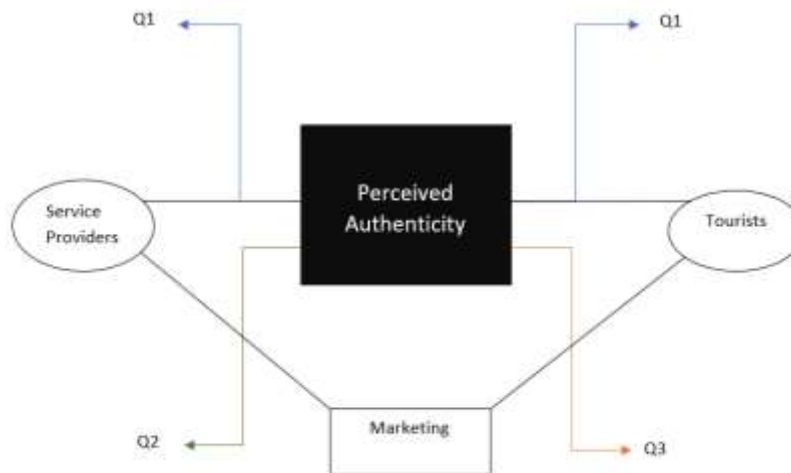
This study attempts to interpret several relations between the concepts of marketing, perceived authenticity, but also between the two groups of stakeholders and the way they relate to the two other concepts. In a first time, the way both stakeholders perceive the concept of authenticity is analyzed in order to have a better understanding of how each one of them understands it. This refers to sub-question number 1 in the conceptual framework and in the sub-research question section, in which the arrow represents the outcome when combining the concepts of 'perceived authenticity' with 'service providers' or 'tourists'. The answer to the first question helps providing an answer to whether each perspective matches in a general sense. The second relationship analyzed is that of how service providers use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content. This refers to sub-question 2, in which the arrow represents the outcome when combining the concepts of 'marketing', 'service providers' and ''perceived authenticity'. The answer to this question helps understanding how service providers apply the way they perceive or not authenticity in their marketing content in order to meet the tourist demand. The answer to this question is relevant in understanding how it meets or not the way tourists perceive authenticity on marketing content. The third relationship analyzed is that of how tourists perceive the concept of

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authenticity in marketing content from service providers. This refers to sub-question 3, in which the arrow represents the outcome when combining 'marketing', 'tourists' and 'perceived authenticity'. The answer to this question helps understanding how tourists react to authenticity when it is perceived on marketing content and whether it is what they seek for. The answer to this question is relevant as it permits to understand how perceived authenticity by tourists matches or not the way it is used in marketing content by service providers. The conceptual framework combines all three sub-questions in order to answer the main research question which can fill the knowledge gaps identified in the previous section.

3.2.   Sub-Questions

In order to answer the research question of this thesis, the research question will be divided into sub-questions. Answering the sub-questions will construct an answer to the main research question. The conceptual framework (image 1) helps in constructing the sub-research questions by relating all relevant concepts to each other.

- Sub-question 1: How is authenticity perceived by both tourists and service providers?

- Sub-question 2: How do service providers use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content?

- Sub-question 3: How do tourists perceive authenticity in marketing content from service providers?

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4.   Methodology

This case study analyzes two groups of stakeholders in a specific social context which is an area in the Belgian Ardennes region. This study attempts to understand how the different stakeholders perceive the concept of authenticity and how they use the concept in marketing strategies. The case study requires in-depth information about these stakeholders and therefore only uses a small sample. The sample being small and the case study being locally grounded, this study is not representative of the rest of the population, however, it helps in understanding more general situations relating to the same topic. Based on the three types of case studies identified by Stake (2003), this case study is instrumental as it focusses on using the case study to gather more information about a topic. It focusses on the topic of 'authenticity' by using the area of study to gather information. Using a case study for this study is useful to understand, describe and explore the different relationships between concepts, but also between stakeholders. This case study works with qualitative data. The following section explains more in detail the way the sample was chosen, the way data was collected and the way the data was analyzed for this study.

4.1.   The Case Study Location

This case study focusses on tourists visiting and service providers living at the *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* an area in the Belgian Ardennes. The Ardennes is a touristic region in the south of Belgium.

Image 2: Map of Belgium, its neighboring countries and the location of the Ardennes region in light green (Site officiel du tourisme du Luxembourg Belge en Ardenne, n.d.).

The name 'Ardennes' is also shared with two other regions in two other countries. These are the French Ardennes and the Luxembourgish Ardennes, but this case focusses on the Belgian Ardennes. This region is known for its nature, its nature-based activities, its culture, and history ("Major geographical areas in Belgium", 2018). In 2016, the Ardennes was the region of Belgium which attracted the most tourists, 29.3% of tourists visiting Belgium visited the Ardennes. During that same year, 2.565.700 nights were spent in the region and tourists visiting the country are mainly tourists from Belgium, from the

Netherlands and from France followed by Germany and England (Commissariat Général au Tourisme, 2017). Although there are reports for 2017 existing, these are not yet published.

The Belgian Ardennes is interesting as a case study as it has attempted to use the concept of authenticity in their tourism promotion strategies several times over the last 20 years. They first used to brand themselves as 'The Authentic Ardennes', followed by "The Real Ardennes" and today as "Ardennes – Enchanting and Amazing" through the promotion of four values, 'authenticity' being one of them (Laëtis, 2018). The region being quite large, it was important for this study to focus on a smaller but relevant area of the region. The area chosen is that of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.*

Image 3: Map of the Belgian Ardennes and each of its areas, the dark blue area being that of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* (Fédération du Tourisme en Luxembourg Belge, 2018).

La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne, also called 'The Heart of the Ardennes', is an area in the Ardennes which offers all of the features the region is well-known for. The FTLB explains that *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* is an area which borders two rivers on which an important part of the tourism in the region is taking place. These two rivers are the Ourthe and the Aisne. The area consists out of five municipalities: Houffalize, La-Roche-en-Ardennes, Rendeux, Érezée, and Manhay. The area has interesting landscapes and nature. There are rocks, forests, open fields, caves, wild animals, etc. The activities in this area relate to nature, such as walking, mountain biking, fishing, kayaking, canoeing, swimming, etc. It is well-known for its history and heritage which still plays an important role in everyday life. This is represented in tourism by museums about Roman villas and Celtic villages, a medieval castle, museums, and memorials about both world wars, numerous churches, and chapels, etc. Culture is important for the

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tourism industry as the area is well-known for its typical small villages, numerous legends which characterize these small villages, the production of traditional and local products such as cheese, charcuterie, and fish, beers and liquor, etc. And finally, the area is known for its gastronomy and its quality in accommodation services (Federation du Tourisme en Luxembourg Belge, 2018). There are no tourism reports available for the area, therefore, no figures can be used to show the importance of tourism in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne*. There are, however, reports for the region as a whole as provided previously, but these are not recent. This lack of statistics and numbers is not necessarily problematic as this study does not base any of its data on numbers, but only on 'perspectives'.

Image 4: Map of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* with its municipalities, rivers, and villages (Fédération du Tourisme en Luxembourg Belge, 2018).

Choosing this area is based on the way it represents the rest of the region quite well, on the fact that it is being called 'The Heart of the Ardennes' which refers to its importance for the whole region and on the fact that the tourism promotion office of the whole region, FTLB, is located in that area. This area is also relevant as both groups of stakeholders are present at the destination and because the concept of 'authenticity' is relevant in their tourism discourse.

Image 5: Picture of the Ourthe and the large forest surrounding it, Filly (Belgium) (Geradin, 2018).

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4.2.   Stakeholders

The research question of this study focusses on two main stakeholder groups, these are service providers and tourists. Based on a report written by the Commissariat Général au Tourisme (CGT) (2017), it is possible to identify relevant service providers in the area. Accommodation providers are constituted by camping's, hotels, holiday villages and bed and breakfasts, and rental houses. Retail services relevant to tourism are often shops where local products and/or souvenirs are sold. These are relevant as their target group is a mix of tourists and locals. Catering is constituted by restaurants, bars, and hotels and catering services. Attraction providers are constituted by cultural related, sports related or entertainment related services such as museums, bike rentals, bird shows, etc. While some services are provided by larger companies or by the government, most of the region's services are provided by smaller local businesses. The second main stakeholder on which this study focusses are tourists visiting *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* The main countries of origin of tourists in the area are from Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and England. The CGT (2017) also identified the activities preferred by tourists per nationality and the main activities are nature and sports-related activities for each one of them. This is followed by cultural related activities and the visiting of villages and cities in the area and the rest of the region (Commissariat Général au Tourisme, 2017).

While the research focusses on only service providers and tourists, a third stakeholder has been identified as relevant in the discourse of 'authenticity' and in the development of tourism and services in the area. This stakeholder is the Federation of Tourism for the Belgian Luxembourg (FTLB). On their website, the FTLB explains that their main objective is to make the tourism industry in the region viable. They achieve this goal through promoting tourism in the region, unify stakeholders from the tourism industry and finally, develop increasingly relationships with stakeholders from outside the tourism industry ("Rôle et missions", n.d.). They have the leading role in developing brand names for the region, they are thus the ones applying the slogans such as "the Authentic Ardennes" or "the Real Ardennes". It

is therefore due to their implication in the promotion of tourism, but also of the destination that the FTLB has been selected as a relevant stakeholder for this study ("Rôle et missions", n.d.).

4.3. Data Collection

The research methods for this case study are qualitative. This research focusses on the different perspectives several stakeholders have on the concept of authenticity in the area of research. As it discusses perspectives, the data collected needs to be detailed enough in order to bring quality to the research and therefore semi-structured interviews and desk research are used.

4.3.1. The Interviews

The interviews used to collect the in-depth data were semi-structured. These types of interviews permit the collection of a wide variety of information about the interviewee's attitudes, expectations, experiences, perceptions, etc. (Adler & Clark, 2011). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and although some of the questions were asked in every interview to keep the important topics covered, it was important for this study to let interviewees "tell their stories" to some extent as well. This has led to new topics or new perspectives on the topic to be discussed, as well as the emergence of valuable information indirectly affecting the case. The interviews are also adapted to the stakeholder group the interviewee represents as each stakeholder group provides a different type of information. Most interviews lasted for about 30 minutes, but one interview lasted for over an hour. While using semi-structured interviews can produce in-depth data, it also produces highly subjective data. It is therefore important to note that the use of these interviews reduces the possibility to generalize it to the wider population.

Using interviews to collect the data is a time-consuming task and therefore reduces the size of the sample considerably. In order to maintain a certain level of balance between the number of interviews collected, this study first aimed at collecting three interviews from tourists, three interviews from service providers and one interview from the tourism promotion office. While the amount of interviews for the tourism promotion office and the service providers is achieved, this is not the case for the tourist group. This imbalance results in more information collected on the service provider perspective than on the tourist perspective. The following section will explain more in detail the sample and the sample size.

4.3.2. Sample and Population

Selecting the sample has been done differently for each stakeholder group. First, an email was sent in order to set-up an interview with a representative of the organization. The interview with the representative lasted for over one hour and additional documents were provided by the organization in order to gather additional official information. Contacting service providers and tourists is more complicated.

In a first time, service providers were sent emails explaining the topic of the research and inviting them for an interview. The service providers chosen to send an email to were selected from a list published by the FTLB in a promotional booklet about the area. In order to maintain a balance between the different municipalities, three service providers per municipality were sent an email. In total, 15 emails were sent, but only three answers came back from which only two were accepting the invitation. The first interviewee offers cabins in the forest made in a romantic style. They have been undergoing many changes

as they used to be a camping but now turned into a rental for wooden cabins. The business is run by a manager and its team. While their clients are mainly Dutch tourists, they are now getting more and more French and Belgian tourists. The second interviewee owns a bed and breakfast and catering service. She provide accommodation, breakfast, and dinner and offer catering services for external groups. The business is owned and managed by a couple and their main clientele are Dutch tourists. The third interviewee was contacted and invited in person. The third and last interviewee rents houses located in the same village as they live. The business is built and run by a couple and their main tourists are Dutch, Flemish, Walloon, French, and German. These service providers are mainly from the accommodation sector as two are rental houses and one is a bed and breakfast.

Contacting tourists was not possible through email as there is no list available beforehand and tourists were not willing to do an interview during their activities nor during their relaxation time because it would take too much time away from their vacation. A solution available was to contact tourists through service providers as it might feel more personal for tourists to participate. The third service provider interviewed was asked whether they would agree on contacting their clients to set up an interview. Only two clients agreed on setting up an interview. The first interviewee was a German student visiting the area with friends and staying at one of the friend's house. The second tourist interviewed is a retired Dutch couple which has been visiting the region for already over 30 years. They come once or twice a year and often visit one of their child living in the area. There was later on not enough time available in the timeframe to do additional interviews.

During the interviews, each respondent was informed of the purpose of this study beforehand, and each gave permission to record the interviews. They have also been informed that this study will not refer to them directly or to their name, but that a description of their service or job could be referred to. They also agreed on this. Furthermore, no interviewee has been harmed or pressured to participate.

4.3.3. Desk Research

A second type of data was collected for this study which is data collected from diverse types of media. This data is used as additional data as the desk research was not the main data collection method and did not provide as much relevant data as the interviews did. Compared to interviews, this desk research does not help enough understanding 'perceived authenticity' as this is a subjective and personal concept and can't be understood through desk research. However, this data helped to gather information about discourse on authenticity on different media used by service providers at the destination.

The collected data provides information about the way service providers and the FTLB use the concept of authenticity in their marketing strategies by using or not the term 'authenticity' or 'authentic'. It also provides information about the way tourists refer or not to the concept of authenticity in their reviews. There was no scheme set up to collect this data because the concept of 'authenticity' does not have specific and set elements listed to look at. The desk research consisted thus of searching for the term 'authentic' or 'authenticity' and other terms used in combination with these but was not systematic.

In the literature review, Pike (2018) discusses the different media used by service providers for marketing purposes. It is based on these media that the desk research was based. Media used were flyers from service providers found at the local tourist information office, informative booklets at the local

tourist information office, magazines written by the FTLB, advertisement boards. These media were chosen because of their availability and important use by both service providers and tourists at the destination. Facebook pages of service providers, websites of service providers and TripAdvisor were used online because these are the three main online media used by service providers. Based on a report written by Kemp (2017), Facebook was identified as the main social media platform used by the Belgian population. Websites are important because service providers themselves chose how they want to be promoting their service. TripAdvisor was chosen because most reviews written by tourists and relating to 'authenticity' or 'authentic' were on this 'reviewing' website.

4.4.   Data analysis

Once the data has been collected through the interviews and the desk research, the next step was to transcribe and to analyze the interviews. This step is the process of interpreting what interviewees discussed, their meanings and perspectives. The data collected are mainly words which have been heard during the interviews and seen during the desk research. During the transcriptions of the interviews and the structuring of the data collected during the desk research, a reduction of the data was done in order to be able to fully focus on answering the research questions. The data reduction is an important step. As Adler and Clark (2011) explain, data reduction influences the conclusions that will be drawn.

Not every interview has been fully transcribed as this is a very time-consuming process. The FTLB interview was fully transcribed as the information was insightful, specific and precise. Service providers and tourists interviews were partially transcribed. During the listening of the interviews, codes which were set up beforehand and which came up were written down as well as the sentence they were in. Data which did not seem relevant enough was discarded in order to leave a place for information which answered one of the sub-questions. Information which did relate indirectly to the coding and additional information which seemed relevant for the study were also written down. A second analysis of the coding results permitted to identify which information to use in the results section.

This has been done through the use of a coding system which permits the analyses to be structured and clear. The coding permits the categorization of the data collected during the data collection period per sub-question and per stakeholder. The coding was based on the three different sub-questions but divided per stakeholder interviewed. In each sub-question, the main themes identified were 'authenticity', 'marketing' and 'experience', but these were not all relevant for each question. Each theme was then divided into several terms or expressions which represent the themes based on the literature review. For example, 'authenticity' was represented by terms such as 'authentic', 'traditional', 'original' or 'real'. Marketing was represented by 'marketing', 'advertisement', 'publicity', or 'internet'. Experience was represented by 'feeling', 'seeing', 'experiencing' or words and expressions which explain or describe experiences of tourists. During the data analysis, new codes came up which extended the coding list such as 'traditional' and 'local' to express authenticity or 'website' for marketing. The coding was also extended by identifying information which was not linked to the three themes, but which was relevant in answering one of the sub-questions or adding important knowledge to the study. Although the coding was intended to be systematic, it became less and less systematic as the coding became more precise and more extensive during the data analysis instead of before the analysis, and because the analysis became 'added value' focused instead of 'coding' focused. Considering that the interviews and desk research have been

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conducted in a different language, the translation during coding was important to keep in mind. This has been done by using a dictionary to make sure the coding in one language did refer to the same in the other language.

5. Results

The following section displays the results and a partial analysis of the data gathered during the interviews and from the desk research. It is organized by stakeholder starting with service providers, followed by tourists and finally, the FTLB. The results from each stakeholder will be categorized in answering one of the sub-questions from the stakeholder's perspective. Therefore, not all questions are stated in exactly the same way as in the research question section. Answers to each question will be briefly summarized to conclude each question.

5.1.   Service Providers

5.1.1.   How do service providers perceive authenticity?

The first respondent associates the term "authenticity" with what is original. It refers thus mainly to something unique, which is not touched by mass tourism yet. The service they provide offers a chance for tourists to reconnect with each other and nature. The feeling they want their clients to have is that of being alone, away from the rest of the world, etc. To get to have tourists in such a place, the respondent explains that there is a certain level of comfort, but that there is no Wi-Fi nor elements which could compromise tourists of feeling alone. They also focus on using and selling local products in their service. This is what ensures quietness, the return to nature and a connection to locality, and consequently what makes them original and authentic. The respondent also explains how it is the way people feel at the location that makes it an authentic experience through the way they relate to nature, to each other, to time. It is thus the way they can relate to nature, the way they relate with each other and their time and the way in which they can relax. From their perspective, tourists seem to be satisfied by only being provided what is necessary.

"There is no Wi-Fi, this is a choice. We were thinking about installing it in the cabins, but decided not to as the reactions from tourists were positive.", interviewed service provider 1.

The second interviewee describes the term "authenticity" as a certain lifestyle, a typical environment, a specific image the region has. The respondent tries to match as well as possible the ideas tourists have of the area into their service. In their opinion, tourists look for what can't be found at home, but still with the idea of 'feeling at home' and this is what they provide to tourists. This is also what they believe the environment does, providing relaxation, adventure and a feeling of "coming back home in another country". They do so by applying certain elements which refer to what is 'typical' of the region and which fits the tourist demand, such as in activities, a state of being, in buildings, in decoration, the local lifestyle, the use of local products, etc. A problem mentioned is that of the application of new and stricter rules than it used to be, which takes away the feeling of 'wild' and 'wildness'. These rules can lead to less "authenticity" in the area and fewer tourists interested in visiting it. The interviewee adds that the way they perceive the area themselves is also what they want tourists to see and experience.

"I am satisfied with how it is here, and that is why we decided to come to live here. If we ever decided to go live somewhere else, we would like to see how it is there and become part of the locals.", interviewed service provider 2.

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The third interviewee does personally not perceive the region as being authentic. The reason for this is that although it comes close to 'traditional' and 'local', the region and people are moving with a certain dynamic to become more advanced and more connected through media especially. People are not 'traditional' anymore either in her opinion. However, locals try to keep certain traditional jobs and products alive in the region. Therefore, the interviewee says that certain features of the culture are disappearing or changing and features from other cultures are being introduced to the local culture. Despite this personal point of view, the interviewee explains that 'authenticity' can be something tourists are looking for, a return to 'traditional' and 'typical'. Tourists who visit the Ardennes region search for what is 'typical' from and for the region. This is also what they try to provide through the way the house is built and the materials used to build it.

"When tourists come to visit this area, I think they also want to rent a house with a fireplace, to go for walks and to bike. I think people do think like that. That when you come to the Ardennes, that you come with expectations of a real Ardennes' house, whatever that may be.", interviewed service provider 3.

She adds to this information that the underlying reason for searching for 'authenticity' could be related to finding oneself to a certain extent, or to create a typical atmosphere in which people experience a specific state of being such as freedom, an ideal way of living, relaxation, etc.

"It could be that people search for such thing in order to manifest themselves. Would it be a search to find oneself? Maybe. But then it becomes very philosophical.", interviewed service provider 3.

Each service provider needed a definition of the term 'authenticity' before deciding whether the area or service they provide is authentic or not. Not all service providers perceive the area as being 'authentic', but all do agree that 'authenticity' is what tourists seek for in the area. There are, however, different reasons for which each perceives the area as authentic for themselves or for tourists. For some it refers to the uniqueness of the area or the service provided, to others it can refer to what is typical for a region or its population, and it can also refer to what is traditional for a region. Service providers also relate 'authenticity' to a feeling or state of being of tourists which can be based on the elements which make the area or service provided 'authentic'. The way service providers implement tourists expectations of the area in their business depends on the perspective and perception they have.

5.1.2.   *How do service providers use media at or about the destination?*

The first interviewee explains how marketing is very important and very well done for their business. Several media have been used to reach clients or keep in touch with them. There is the website which permits people to gather information about the business, to reserve and to get in contact with the owners. They are very present on social media such as Facebook and Instagram as that is where they try to have tourists themselves promote and share their experience. Visitors are asked to share specific pictures or reviews and through this, they can win a free weekend or a free aperitif at the location. They use folders and appear in booklets provided by the tourism promotion office. They also appear on external media which help to promote the business. The business appeared on tv programs due to their original and unique concept. They appeared in magazines such as lifestyle magazines and adventure magazines.

Due to a recent project of scaling up the business, they also appeared in regional and local newspapers and finally they use bloggers to review and promote the business on social media. A lot of time and thoughts has been put into marketing and especially in marketing through their own clients, making it an important element for their business.

The second interviewee explains how their marketing goes mainly through word to mouth from their previous or actual clients, friends, and family. Word to mouth advertisement is important as it works as advertisement and as a review. Those satisfied with their experience share it with their friends and so on, but they also come back themselves. Online reviews are also important to them. They read online reviews and email clients who just returned home to ask for feedback and create also a relationship with the client. This is done mainly through Facebook and Messenger, where people look for reviews posted by previous clients, try to make a reservation and once they are at the destination, 'search' for the owners on Facebook.

"Those people want to know about you and keep in touch. You just have to share a lot.",
interviewed service provider 2.

They also have a website for their business, appear on tourism related websites and try to promote their business at events by discussing and handing out business cards. They are satisfied with the number of clients they have at the moment, and therefore do not need more types of media for marketing.

The third interviewee mentions working with their own website where clients can contact them and gather information about the service provided, but also through word to mouth advertisement. They are also present on an intermediary website which helps the owners to find more clients. Themselves are not active on social media and therefore do not feel like working with it. They do not use social media although they think it is important in tourism nowadays.

It seems thus that for service providers websites are a type of media to have and to use. Depending on the type of business and clients, additional methods are used for marketing purposes. Businesses who focus on attracting many one-time visitors use various types of marketing strategies which seem less personal. Service providers who focus on maintaining their clientele use more personal marketing strategies such as word to mouth and social media platforms. The use of social media seems to be important, but is, however, not used by all. Although the different types of media used permit the gathering of information, reviewing is also an important aspect these media provide.

5.1.3. *How do they use the concept of authenticity on media?*

Service providers' websites are the main media on which the term 'authenticity' was used by service providers. The concept of "authenticity" is used by service providers mainly in the name of the business or in the description of the service provided. In the case of using the word "authentic" in the business name, an example can be that of 'Hostellerie L'Authentique'. The other way of using the concept of "authenticity" by service providers is to use it as an adjective to describe the service which is being provided or the environment in which the service is provided. Examples of how the service is described are as follow:

" Our idyllic hotel, which combines comfort, authenticity, and coziness with tranquility and nature."

"As the … is a residence in a typical style, all renovations and changes have been carried out to preserve the authentic character."

"This authentic barn from the 1880's was renovated …", talking about a rental house.

" The (name of the business) has a cozy, authentic character and is surrounded by a calming valley."

"The (name of the business) is the perfect wedding between authenticity and modernity."

Examples of how the environment is described by the service provider are as follow:

"The (name of the business) provides you with a cooking of quality, combining tradition and local tastes, … a warming welcoming, in a charming and authentic environment."

The term 'authenticity' or 'authentic' seems to be used mainly by accommodation providers, whether these are hotels, bed, and breakfasts or rental houses. Camping's, retails, and activities are less likely to use the word "authenticity" on the internet. From the desk research noted that although several service providers in the region seem to use the word "authenticity" on their websites, these same service providers do not use the word on their social media. The use of the word "authenticity" is minimalistic when it comes to flyers or business cards. Service providers do not seem to use the word "authenticity" to describe their service or the location at which the service takes place on flyers nor on their business cards.

Several other words have been used in order to refer to the service provided or to the environment in which the services being provided. These words are "charming", "real", "traditional", "artisanal", "historical", "calm", "comfort", "local", "typical", "picturesque". Several of these words have been used on the internet, on social media platforms, on flyers and on advertisement boards.

"For those who search time and space to recover from the hectic everyday life can find all the ingredients needed in this place."

"Do you want to escape the pressure from modern living? Book this place."

"The (name of the business) is the perfect wedding between authenticity and modernity."

"The (name of the business) will surprise you with its contrast between old and new."

"Our house produces the different products in a traditional way."

"The restaurant (name of the business) welcomes you in a typical Ardennes surrounding."

"This rental house combines the charm from the past with the quality of the modern life."

The first interviewee explains how they try to portray the image the business wants their clients to see, which is nature, romance, freedom and far from everything, in their marketing. They do so by using the color green and by showing specific pictures matching that wanted image such as pictures of forest,

water, and wood. They have used the word 'authentic', 'cozy' and 'charming' to describe the experience to be lived in their business on the website.

The second interviewee explains how they try to maintain the 'feeling of coming home in another country' on their website and social media. This is done by keeping close relationships with past clients through becoming friends on Facebook to keep informed about one another, but also by showing pictures and reviews. On their website, they use pictures of nature-related activities, local products, and a natural lifestyle. They also repeat the word 'typical' to describe the village in which the business is located and the enjoyable Burgundian lifestyle.

The third interviewee does try to implement 'authenticity' in their business such as in the type of materials used to build the house and the type of interior. On the other hand, they do not focus on showing 'authenticity' in their media. They emphasize nature and quietness of the area. This is also what they want clients to see and experience when visiting the rental houses. What can be seen on their website is a lot of the color green, a picture of the location and the houses to rent.

"The village lays in the protection of the valley, far away from noise and stress, in a green environment with a beautiful view over the valley.", quote from the website of interviewed service provider 3*.*

Therefore, while the term 'authenticity' or 'authentic' seems to be relevant for service providers to use on their website, the interviews show that the concept or term is not consciously thought about. This difference is interesting as it shows that the term or concept can be used, but maybe not in a strategical way. More importance is put on representing well the service provided and the area in their marketing content and not necessarily to apply the concept thoroughly. Service providers do however mention including several 'typical' or 'traditional' elements of the area in their content, which can mean using the concept unconsciously.

Image 6: A rental house which applies the use of local materials and local 'expected' elements tourists seek for when renting a house in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* Filly (Belgium) (Geradin, 2018)*.*

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5.2. Tourists

5.2.3. How do they perceive authenticity?

The first interviewee mentioned several adjectives when asked to describe the region. It is quiet, green, natural, rural and hilly. The term 'Authentic' was not used at first. In a first time, the interviewee explained what she understood by the term. It refers to the fact that the local culture and environment is created and supported by the local population and that the region is not existing as a destination for tourists. The area is not staged for touristic purposes and there are no massif amounts of tourists present. It is only when the interviewee was asked whether the region was authentic that the interviewee explained why the region could be qualified as such. The reason is that a specific culture could be distinguished by specific features. Other words associated with the term 'authentic' were words such as 'original', 'typical' and 'own'.

"The area is indeed authentic because you can see the local culture such as the kiss on the cheek and the beer culture and nature.", interviewed tourist 1.

The interviewee explains not having many expectations before visiting, but adds having lived a new experience and an authentic experience. The reason for this is that she saw new landscapes and a new culture, visited a new destination and at the destination saw 'typical' houses and nature matching the expectations. Another element which makes it more authentic is the language barrier. It isn't easy to communicate with locals in the Ardennes, but it is that language barrier which makes the locals 'authentic'. Authenticity could also be found in objects, buildings, and products. It is because the products are local that there is a feeling of originality when consuming them. The interviewee adds to this information that the feeling of being original is probably created for tourists. The interviewee explained that her reflection came only during the interview as during her stay she was not necessarily aware or seeking for 'authenticity'. In some villages it was easier to get the feeling of 'authenticity', but that was not always the case. Also the fact of visiting the area with a person who knows the region makes it even more authentic as there are many cultural aspects you learn about which changes the experience.

Image 7: La Roche-en-Ardennes (Belgium), a 'typical' small town in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* (Geradin, 2018).

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The second interviewees describe the region as being 'typical' but do not refer to it as being authentic at first. It is only when asked whether they think the region is authentic that they agree and explain why this is the case. In a first time, they describe 'authenticity' as being something 'typical', a feature that can't be found anywhere else. This is also why they agree that the region is authentic because certain behaviors and the mentality can't be found anywhere else and seems to be stuck in the past. They go on by discussing how the words 'typical' and 'original' do very well fit the area. They often refer to a behavior or object to be 'typically Walloon'. Certain rural aspects represent well the mentality of the region and this is what the interviewees understand by the term 'typical'.

"You see for example barbed-wire being supported by a rope and this is what keeps the cows in their land. That is typically Walloon.", interviewed tourist 2.

There is a certain 'typical laxity'. The language is also something 'typical' as you need to know the language to find your way. This barrier can lead to problems in the way the service is provided. The interviewees explain that service providers are not in line with the client, that service providers do not necessarily like tourists. The word 'typical' also fits the style of buildings in the region through the type of materials used to build. It also fits the nature as nature is unique in the Ardennes, you can't find a diversity in nature and landscapes like this anywhere else. Despite the idea of being stuck in the past and the typical mentality and behavior, the interviewees explain that there are also changes taking place.

"These typical small villages are slowly disappearing. They are being replaced by cheaper and newer materials.", interviewed tourist 2.

The interviewees explain that the reason they came to the Ardennes and especially the area is that they wanted to see nature, old farms, old churches and small villages. That authenticity was and still is therefore important in making the choice to visit the region in the first place and they expect that this is also one of the main reasons other tourists to visit the Ardennes.

Image 8: A view of the diversity of nature at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* Filly (Belgium) (Geradin, 2018).

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Each tourist interviewed needed a definition of the term 'authenticity' before deciding whether the area or service they provide is authentic or not. Both tourists perceive the area as 'authentic' because of several elements present which are recognized as 'typical' from there such as in physical elements, but also in behavioral elements. Both also perceived the area as 'authentic' because tourism is not fully developed, marketing isn't fully developed and advertisement is not too visible. Authenticity is less referred to as a feeling, compared to what service providers expect. This could be unconscious and not necessarily recognized by tourists, which could also explain why 'authenticity' is not the main reason for which tourists chose the area.

5.2.4.   How do they use media at or about the destination?

The first interviewee explains that several media were used during and after the stay in the area. During the trip, the interviewee had a brief look on the website of the service provider stayed at. The interviewee did not explain the reason for which she looked at the website, but said it was nice to see the accommodation on the internet. A second type of media used was that of social media. These were used as a way to share images about the trip with friends and family, especially Instagram.

"I didn't really check (the internet) before my stay, but during I checked the website (of the accommodation).", interviewed tourist 1.

The interviewee also explains that the lack of advertisements might be something positive as it keeps the feeling of originality and locality in the experience.

The second interviewees explain that they do not see or notice a lot of advertisement about the region. They used to receive a tourism promotion booklet at home, but this is not the case anymore. The main way they hear about the region is through word to mouth. Encounters, friends, and family talk about the place they have visited in the Ardennes and the activities they did during their stay. They add that there is not much advertisement in the region either, but that when they encounter some, it is when they are already at the destination. They also do not necessarily search on the internet for more information about the region because they prefer to find new places and new experiences by hazard when traveling through the region.

The way tourists use or not media depends on how they want to first encounter the area. Both tourists seem not wanting to base their expectations on what they have perceived on marketing content and did, therefore, do not do research beforehand about the area. This makes it more interesting to discover the area and what it has to offer. Most information seems to be shared through word to mouth beforehand or through locals which can give it an extra touch of 'authenticity'.

5.2.5.   How do they perceive authenticity in marketing content from service providers?

The use of the term 'authentic' or 'authenticity' is not as important in reviews of tourist about a destination or a business. Several other words are used in order to discuss their stay, such as 'traditional', 'local', 'charming', 'natural', etc. The word 'authentic' has come only twice in the observation of reviews on websites and social media.

The first interviewee explains how she did not notice the concept of authenticity in advertisement during her stay. She adds that not seeing the concept as clear at the destination is better as claiming to be authentic takes away the authenticity. This was not the case during her stay. The interviewee also adds that the slogan of the area 'enchanting and relaxing' do fit into the image of authenticity as it describes well what the region represents and has to offer. The interviewee also adds that showing in marketing content what will be seen at the destination needs to be realistic and representative.

"I think if you use the concept too much, it becomes automatically less authentic.", interviewed tourist 1.

The interviewee finally explains that not being able to create expectations based on marketing content has made her experience at the *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* more authentic. This is because she experienced a new adventure not prefabricated based on marketing content.

The second interviewee also mentions not searching for advertisement at the destination, nor before. They emphasize the importance to look at nature instead of looking at buying and consuming. They, therefore, do not add more information to what the previous interviewee discussed on perceived authenticity in marketing content. They explain, however, that it is important to make a difference between 'real' and 'staged' authenticity of activities. Some activities promote the reconstruction of battles in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* but that is not an authentic experience for them. The real authenticity is in museums which try to reconstruct real moments through documents and 'real' pictures. They might, therefore, be more attracted to an advertisement for activities in the area which promotes 'cold authenticity' over 'hot authenticity'.

'Authenticity' thus does not seem to be something tourists search for or refer to consciously on marketing media. Others words can be used which indirectly can refer to 'authentic', but this seems again not to be a conscious process. It is however perceived as negative when service providers refer to themselves or their service as being authentic. The lack of overwhelming advertisement at the destination does also add a feeling of 'authenticity' perceived by tourists as it makes the destination seem less touristic.

5.3. FTLB

5.3.3. How does the tourism promotion office perceive authenticity?

The interviewee at the FTLB described the term "authenticity" as referring to what is real, a connection to men and women making the territory, something picturesque and typical. Adding that the term is very subjective, the interviewee supposes that it refers to something different for tourists visiting the area. This perspective is personal, the interviewee at the FTLB continued by explaining the process through which the organization went in order to understand how the concept of 'authenticity' could be understood and applied to the region.

"The Authentic Ardennes" used to be the slogan used by the FTLB to promote tourism in the Belgian Ardennes in the early 2000'. The fact of naming the region as authentic seemed to be taking the "authenticity" out of it, therefore, the FLB decided to stop qualifying it as such. By using the term "authentic" several elements were already implied which could not be found in the region. They decided to use the slogan "the real Ardennes", but again this resulted in a misuse of the term "real".

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"We noticed after some time that the fact of saying it is authentic wasn't very authentic anymore.",
representative of the FTLB.

Although the interviewee explained that the concept was abandoned for some time, he added that it reappeared when they introduced the "values of the Ardennes brand". These values helped the FTLB having a better understanding of what the region represents and has to offer: nature, stone, water, and emotions. These values are well-being, enchantment, sharing, and authenticity. Here, authenticity refers to 'locality', naturality', 'purity', 'natural', 'simplicity' and 'fidelity' and the reality in these elements. The interviewee explains that they use the concept of authenticity, but instead of using the term, they use variations of the concept. These four values form the base for promotions in the region. By promoting what represents 'real' and 'original' features of the region, authenticity is being included in promotions and advertisement. Through these four values, the interviewee explains that they do not lie about the region, do not over-promise nor under-deliver. This process of applying authenticity to the region is at the moment focusing mainly on the promotion of the territory but is expected to expend to enterprises and local service providers in tourism and even outside the tourism industry. The interviewee says that it is a very dynamic process at the moment. The definition given to authenticity in these four values is "a territory which turns around purity, nature, ecology and mixing simplicity and fidelity", which refers to offering what is real, what makes the territory.

Image 9: A banner explaining the four values the FTLB wants to promote in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* (Laëtis, 2018).

"Well-being. Land of tranquility, of serenity, of balance, of vitality and liberty. Authenticity. A territory imbued with naturality, purity, based on nature, ecology, combining simplicity and fidelity. Enchantment. Place of dreams and poetry, of romance, but also of creativity. Sharing. Land of welcome, of listening, of respect, of encounter and exchange.", translation of the four values promoted by the FTLB.

'Authenticity' used thus to be a confusing and misunderstood term for the FTLB which needed developing before being able to use it. The concept is best used implicitly and is perceived by the representative as referring to what is real, original, typical and local. Based on the definition of the new promotional values of the region, new terms are associated with 'authenticity' which do indirectly refer to 'typical', 'original' and 'real'. The new terms are however not recognized by tourists or service providers, while the terms the FTLB representative refers to that of tourists and service providers.

5.3.4.   How do they apply authenticity in tourism in the region?

During the interview, the interviewee referred to the term 'authenticity' as being 'what makes the territory'. He explains that it is not the actual term 'authenticity' which matters the most, it is the way it is applied to marketing and the tourism service at the destination. Some actors apply it very well in their

service and for quite some time already, but this is not the case for all. They aim at developing a stronger tourism for the region through mobilizing service providers of the region to have them understand and apply the image of the region and high quality in their service. The interviewee explains that this process is very important as the FTLB is not the one providing services, the service providers are. They want the region to focus on two important elements of tourism as a new project: becoming an experience-based destination and becoming a sustainable destination. These experiences are based on the four values discussed previously: well-being, authenticity, enchantment, and sharing. To do so, they want service providers and their clients to be more in contact and have a stronger relationship. This is done through promoting local products and local actors in marketing. It is estimated that this makes the region 'realer'. The second important element, sustainability, is because nature is one of the main tourist attraction in the Ardennes and it is, therefore, important to develop its potential to a maximum. This is how they want to make tourist demand be met by service providers' services.

One of the biggest challenges is that of delivering what is being promised. At the moment, service providers are not all well aligned with the tourism industry and the demand. The region promotes itself as having several qualities which are not always well represented.

"We claim to be clean and the roads are dirty. We claim to be welcoming and everyone is pulling a face.", representative of the FTLB.

The interviewee explains that in the European tourism industry, it was noticed that tourists visiting the Ardennes are often people searching for values matching their own, such as enrichment and fulfillment. Therefore, the elements of authenticity and sustainability are important to be maintained for tourism in the Ardennes. In this way, they want to change the discourse about the region and turn it into a positive image.

"The Brand 'Ardennes' is based on common values with the will of doing better together. This brand offers a new discourse about the region.", explanation of the brand on the brand website (Laëtis, 2018).

The concept of authenticity is thus applied by the FTLB through setting-up promotional values which need to be applied by service providers to their service to meet the tourist demand. One of these values is that of authenticity which is applied through improving the relationship between the service provider and the tourists. This is done by implementing 'what is local' into the relationship between the service provider and the tourist by being friendlier to the tourist, more in line with its demand and by using local products and elements in the service provided. Service providers are also mobilized to put more importance on representing and maintaining the image of the region in order to not over-promise to tourists, but under-deliver.

5.3.5.   How do they use authenticity on marketing content in the region?

It is important for tourism in the region and its values to be known by both tourists and service providers. The FTLB's website is important and will be soon improved in order to promote the different values. The website will also provide marketing studies and reports for all actors of the region to be used. The website is being supported by several different types of media. Other media provided by the internet are for example newsletters, blogs supported by the organization and social media. The interviewee

explains the importance of social media as it permits to reach larger and new communities. This is again a place where the four values are applied, but contrary to the website, on social media, they apply the values implicitly. Other media are brochures and booklets, fairs and the press. The FTLB also developed a report with codes and guidelines for all service providers to apply these four values

In order to help service providers, the FTLB developed a report in which several strategies were listed to help spread the values of the region so that all stakeholders are in line with the brand. They want to focus on spreading 'authenticity' by using 'real' pictures which have not be retouched. This means showing and using local products presented with a local and natural décor. It also means showing simple and 'authentic' activities. An example of such would fishing. One last way is that of showing images where the horizon is very present in nature. They want to use specific colors, a specific word type, headings and specific words which represent the region.

"Simplicity, sincerity, natural, honesty, veracity, conservation, preservation, being real, being natural, heritage, tradition, history, origins, roots, nature, purity, ecology, etc.", words referring to authenticity based on the report of the FTLB (CoManaging, 2010).

"Respect for origins. Quality of local products. Preservation of the environment. Keep traditions alive. Being sincere. Being realer than real. Carry on 'savoir-faire'. Being loyal to traditions. Being simple. Act naturally. Being pure.", expressions referring to authenticity based on the report of the FTLB (CoManaging, 2010).

It is through the use of these elements that 'authenticity' will be applied and spread implicitly on marketing content. The goal of applying such strategies is that all tourism actors in the region use and spread the same brand and its values. This can be seen in already several of the FTLB's own promotion media, such as in booklets where all strategies are being used to represent the brand and its values. The FTLB does indeed not refer as often to the term 'authenticity' but uses words such as 'tradition', 'nature', 'heritage', etc.

The FTLB wants thus to apply the four values of the brand to all their own marketing content, but also want service providers to apply these values to their own marketing content. This is done through the use of specific elements referring to the four values, and some also refer specifically to the concept of authenticity. The aim of this strategy is for all relevant actors in the region to be in line with the brand and its four values and to apply them in marketing content. The consequence is that the brand is consistent for the entire region and is supported by all service providers. This can be important to improve the image of the region and have a stronger tourism development.

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6.   Discussion and Conclusion

The following chapter of this study is the discussion and conclusion. The result section has already synthesized to some extent the results from the data collection, but these have not yet been related to the literature discussed in the literature review. The discussion is constructed in four sections. Each section answers one of the sub-questions by first combining the literature to the findings and ends by answering the sub-question, as well as a section which discusses additional findings. The discussion is followed by the conclusion in which a final answer to the main research question is provided.

6.1. In what ways is authenticity perceived by both tourists and service providers?

The concept of 'authenticity' does not seem to be known at first sight for neither tourists nor service providers. Both stakeholders are not aware of the exact meaning of the word, nor of the different perspectives the concept can have. Although the concept is quite important in tourism studies, it seems to be a less common topic of discussion or importance for service providers and tourists in the region. This gap between the scientific and applied world could lead to misunderstanding and miscommunications between theories on the concept and the way the concept is applied or used in an actual setting. This point is exemplified by the way the tourism promotion office (FTLB) and service providers each relate to the concept. The FTLB has done several types of research and studies in order to have a better understanding of the word 'authenticity' and they, therefore, feel more comfortable talking and applying the concept to the promotion of the region. Service providers, on the other hand, have not given the concept as much thought as they have not been in contact with the theoretical aspect of the concept in general. They are thus not aware of the different definitions, perspectives on the word, nor its relevance and consequently, they do not apply the concept consciously the way the FTLB does. While service provider and tourists struggle with defining the concept, the FTLB easily defines it. Their definition is however not fully in line with that of service providers and tourists. They go deeper into the concept and the meanings the concept can take. Their definition is more developed than that of tourists and service providers. Whereas scholars such as Cohen and Avieli (2004) and Marine-Roig (2015) discuss the importance of 'how' tourists perceive authenticity for a destination, this appears to be less relevant for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* because service providers and tourists are not consciously aware of the concept.

It is only once the meaning and perspectives of the word 'authentic' are proposed that service providers and tourists seem comfortable discussing their opinion on the matter. Each respondent refers to a different perspective of the word ranging from original, typical, traditional and local. It is based on the perspective each one chose that they decided whether the study area was authentic or not. While some qualify the region as being authentic because it does seem typical, original and local for them, some refer to the traditional perspective of authenticity to perceive the area and therefore do not qualify the region as being authentic. The choice made on the perspective greatly influences whether the area will be qualified as authentic or not. This supports to a certain extent what Cohen and Cohen (2012) suggest about not focusing on defining and categorizing the concept of authenticity anymore, but to look at the different processes people use to confirm whether something is authentic or not. This does also support

what Jensen and Lindberg (2001) explain about the concept of authenticity. More importance is placed on the emotional attachment to the concept by tourists and service providers in order to understand the concept than on the definition and facts of the concept.

The three different types of authenticity discussed by Wang (1999) have been relevant to this study. All interviewees refer at some point to one of the three types Wang (1999) identifies: objective, constructed and existential authenticity. Some of the service providers and tourists even refer to one or more of these types of authenticity to describe the area. There can thus be different types of perceived authenticity in one destination, but also for one person. Some have even referred to the three of them, through visiting museums in which objective authenticity is perceived, through the 'typical' elements which make the area authentic referring to constructed authenticity and through the feeling of being free and in relation with nature as is with existential authenticity. What differentiates them are the process and elements which make people refer to one of these types of authenticity. Some elements from constructed authenticity can also be the base for existential authenticity to exist, as for example seeing typical farms and getting a feeling of 'being stuck in the past'. This does, however, show that contrary to what Reisinger and Steiner (2006), it is not mainly 'existential authenticity' which helps to make sense of experiences, but a combination of 'things' and 'meanings' as Belhassen and al. (2008) suggest. This is not only relevant for perceived authenticity of tourists as service providers also refer to certain states of being and typical elements which make the region 'what it is'. The way they perceive any of these types of authenticity is applied to the service they provide and use it in order to create expectations for tourists on marketing content.

Although the word 'authenticity' does not seem to be of main importance in discussions, at first sight, other terms have indirectly been connected to the concept of 'authenticity'. *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* has been qualified as natural, rural, relaxing, typical and traditional. These adjectives have also been used in connection with the word 'authentic'. 'Typical' has been the main word used when discussing the concept of authenticity. It has been used to refer to nature, landscapes, lifestyles, and behaviors, and products which are bound to the location and even for some, that can't be found anywhere else. To some extent, 'typical' seems to be used unconsciously to represent the concept of 'authenticity' in the area by both tourists and service providers. Another term which seems to be used that way is the term 'locality'. Both tourists and service providers set forward the use or consumption of local products. Service providers explain using local products or materials in their business to put forward what is local. This aspect is also what tourists say to be searching for and found it in the area. A third way of perceiving authenticity for both sides is how the experience does not seem staged. Each stakeholder group has referred to the small number of tourists visible at the destination and the fact that it does not feel like a tourist destination. These are the terms which have come up as relevant in the discourse on authenticity. This also goes against Boorstin's (1961) theory which says that tourists are also satisfied even when knowing the experience is not authentic. Tourists do appreciate perceiving the experience they have lived in the area as authentic and have searched for it, just as MacCannell (1973) discusses. The feeling of not being at a destination is what makes the area authentic for tourists. This supports what Chhabra (2005) explains. These terms are used with a specific meaning but might refer to a broader common understanding. In this case, the broader understanding being that of 'untouched by globalization'. Several explanations about the area mention the feeling 'of being stuck in the past'. This is also a feeling service

providers have about the destination. They want to show the 'typical' lifestyle and mentality which makes the area enjoyable.

As Zhou and al. (2015) discuss, the image service providers have of authenticity does include their knowledge and belief about the area. The way service providers perceive authenticity in the region seems to be represented in their business through the use of specific objects or products, also referred to as elements by Chhabra (2003). These elements represent the area through the eyes of the service provider and local. By using these elements, service providers project their knowledge and belief about the region on tourists, consequently influencing the tourists' perception of authenticity (Marine-Roig, 2015). As Zhou and al. (2015) explain, the concept of authenticity is also commercially grounded. Service providers in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* try to provide tourists with an experience which matches their expectations in order to sell experiences. This is however not the only reason as service providers include the concept of 'authenticity' and its elements in their business as they feel it is important in order to be in line with the local values and norms. This is how the concept of authenticity is applied to marketing content, even if it isn't always a conscious process. It is thus also representative of personal values and beliefs as they want to include locality and tradition in their business and in the region in general as Marine-Roig (2015) explains.

In order to answer the first research question, it can thus be said that tourists and locals do each perceive authenticity at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* within the same broader category which is that of 'typical' and 'traditional', but this is not a conscious perception at first. It is only perceived and reflected on when asked about it. It is also not a directly relevant concept for tourists and service providers. Some of the same words have been used to describe the area, but the meanings attached to these terms are not the same for all. While tourists seem to perceive the area as authentic because of its 'typical', 'not modern' and 'not touristic' elements, service providers perceive the area as authentic because of its 'originality' and the 'typical' activities, traditions, elements, etc. that can be done there and which represent their 'area'. Authenticity is perceived for each through a combination of symbols and physical elements with a state of being, this is thus a combination of different types of authenticity in one experience. Nature also seems a relevant element which steers up 'authenticity' for tourists and service providers, but also for the FTLB. In general, it seems like tourists base their expectations and perceived authenticity on several of the same elements which are authentic for service providers.

6.2. How do service providers use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content?

The way marketing is used depends on the success and the goal at which the business aims. When the business is less personal and aims at attracting many tourists, there seems to be a tendency to attract tourists as much as possible through advertisement and sales. This helps to reach tourists on a larger scale, but they do not necessarily seem to aim at retaining clients who already visited the business. If the goal is not to attract many tourists and to keep a personal touch to their business, keeping the advertisement small-scaled can be used. Marketing of that business goes then through word to mouth and depends highly on the way tourists have experienced the service. In order to retain clients, contact remains through personal communication with the client. A mix of these two options exists as came out of the interviews as Pike (2018) suggests. If a business tries to keep its previous clients for a more personal feeling but needs

additional clients in order to be profitable, a mix of word to mouth and advertisement can be used. Word to mouth ensures that those who came actually come back later on, as well as friends and family. The use of advertisement can be used to attract new clients on a larger scale, but this is then not the only marketing method. As Pike (2018) explains, the marketing choices made will influence the image the business will carry and spread. The way marketing method and content are being used and with what intensity can influence whether a business will be perceived as authentic or not. Tourists at the destination mentioned the small amount of advertisement and promotion available which does make the destination more 'authentic'. Word to mouth advertisement can give a feeling of 'locality' or 'feeling at home' which can stir up perceived authenticity of a business. This does not seem as an intended outcome from marketing strategies of service providers in the area. This is more an outcome of the way they have or have not used advertisement.

On an individual level, the concept of authenticity is not always consciously used. Pine and Gilmore (2012) explain that the use of the concept in marketing is often implicit. This means that when the concept is being used in marketing content, it is often not directly recognizable by tourists. It is applied through the use of elements which stirs up a feeling of authenticity as suggested by Chhabra (2003), and Mura and Lovelock (2009). In the case of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* the use of the term 'authenticity' or 'authentic' has been seen quite often on advertisement content. This is opposite to what came out of the interviews, in which service providers try to apply several elements referring to authenticity implicitly as Pine and Gilmore (2007) suggest. This is done by showing pictures which represent the image of the business or the region, or by using pictures which meet the expectations of tourists by the use of relevant elements representing the area which refers to iconic authenticity (Casteran & Roederer, 2013). As not every service provider sees the area as authentic, they might be unconsciously portraying the concept through showing pictures of typical houses, typical elements such as wood and stone, local products, or through the use of words which relate closely to authenticity such as using the word 'typical', 'traditional', etc. This is what Pine and Gilmore (2007) have suggested, that what is represented in marketing is 'true', but that it should also meet the expectations of tourists. Trying to provide tourists with what they expect to see or with what they will see is a strategy well-known by service providers at the destination also (Echtner & Prasad, 2003), but the way they apply or not and to what extent the concept of authenticity is different based on the way the service provider perceives the region or the goal of the service provider.

While service providers do not make 'authenticity' a priority in their marketing content, the FTLB wants 'authenticity' to become a strategy used by service providers in order to represent the image of the region in their marketing content. Just as Kolb (2017) discusses, the tourism promotion office does see the importance of strong marketing strategies at the destination which will positively create, change or reinforce tourists' expectations. They want to do so by using symbols and signs which refer to authenticity or the idea of authenticity in marketing content (Silver, 1993). This is again done by using pictures, colors, fonts which do refer or stir up a feeling of 'authenticity. These symbols and signs are that what tourists will use in order to create or change their expectations of the region. However, the FTLB sees a lack of involvement from service providers to achieve such goals. They would like service providers to include the concept of authenticity in their marketing content by using specific symbols and signs as they do which represent 'the real', 'the traditional', 'the unique', etc. The tourism promotion office does see the

importance of meeting the tourist demand and their expectations as this adds value to the region. Service providers are not an organization focusing on the promotion of tourism and therefore might not have the time or the resources to invest in such strategies as expected by the tourism promotion office. This lack of coordination can create confusion and deceptive experiences for tourists to whom promises won't be entirely kept. This is what Kolb (2017) refers to when explaining that tourist deception is dangerous for the destination's image.

To answer this sub-question it can be said that service providers do not consciously apply the concept of authenticity in their marketing content. This is due to an unfamiliar relationship between them and the concept. They, however, use the way they perceive their business and the area in their marketing strategies by using symbols or creating/maintaining a specific feeling. These symbols can be elements 'typical' or 'original' of the area. This is how the concept, despite not being applied explicitly, still plays a role in how service providers apply marketing strategies. For example, those who estimate that it is the typical lifestyle and mentality of locals that make the area authentic try to reproduce that 'authenticity' within their service and business and will perpetuate it in their marketing content and strategies. This is also what is expected to attract tourists. Therefore, marketing content also bases itself on tourist expectation, but not only.

6.3. How do tourists perceive authenticity in marketing content from service providers?

Although marketing is an important element for service providers, tourists do not consciously notice it in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne*. It is only when tourists are asked about their view on marketing in the area that they do reflect on the question. Pike (2018) pressures the importance of marketing as this is the most visible process of marketing at a destination and Pine and Gilmore (2012) pressure the strategic use of the concept of authenticity in marketing. In the case of *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* tourists enjoy the lack of advertisement and this makes the area 'more authentic', this can also be a strategy to implicitly use 'authenticity'. Marketing, therefore, needs to be implicit and discrete as Pine and Gilmore (2012) suggest. This is what Beverland and Luxton (2005) refer to, how less a region or a business promotes itself, how closer it gets to be 'authentic'. Associated with this is a feeling of being between locals and not feeling like being at a touristic destination which is important as seen previously for perceived authenticity of tourists. This also refers to Taylor (2001) as tourists feel 'authenticity' because of the perceived lack of marketing.

As Pine and Gilmore (2007) suggest, not referring directly to 'authenticity' and 'being authentic' is important in order to remain 'authentic'. This is what tourists notice at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne*. When using the concept explicitly, it can be perceived as claiming a title or an image. Claiming such a title takes away the 'authentic' aspect of actually being 'authentic'. It is also important to only claim to be authentic when this is really the case as the FTLB mentions. Using the word as an attention catcher can result in tourist being disappointed. This can affect the image of the business, but also that of the region as 'not authentic'. The FTLB does understand this as they do not want to use the word in their promotion, but they want tourists to perceive it. A whole report has been written on how colors, fonts, images, and symbols can stir up a feeling of perceived authenticity within tourists. An important aspect of such being the use of pictures of places, activities, and products that people will actually see the way it is represented

in the picture. This is one of the strategies used by the FTLB which has been supported by tourists. Building their expectations on 'real' images will reduce the possibility to be surprised.

For some, not having any expectations beforehand can make the experience of discovering the area more authentic. Xie and Wall (2002) discussed the importance of the influence of expectations on perceived authenticity and as expectation are built on what is known or what has been seen about a destination or other previous experiences (Asplet & Cooper, 2000). In this case, not being faced with images or advertisement about *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* beforehand makes the experience feel as new and permits tourists to discover the region. This can have an important influence on perceiving the destination as authentic. Perceived authenticity does therefore not necessarily base itself on what is known about a destination or a business, but can also be based on what isn't known about a destination or business.

When looking at marketing content there are several elements to which a tourist refers when perceiving the business or region as authentic at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne*. This is what Chhabra (2005) and Mura and Lovelock (2009) have been referring to when they explain that several elements stir up perceived authenticity within tourists. This is also a process taking place when tourists are faced with marketing content. The elements identified which stir up perceived authenticity at the destination can also be the elements which stir up perceived authenticity when seen in marketing content. Such elements can be showing pictures or colors of water, forest, wood, stone, typical farms, typical villages, etc. This is a strategy used by service providers in order to meet or shape tourist expectations about a region or a business. As tourists perceive authenticity based on their experiences, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge, these elements are specific to the destination and the person. If the destination attracts a certain type of tourists for the 'typical' elements it offers, these elements will probably be the ones used in marketing content by service providers (Chhabra, 2005).

The answer to this sub-question is thus as follows. Tourists perceive authenticity in *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* through the identification of several elements meeting their expectations or being perceived as 'typical' on marketing content. This can refer to seeing 'typical' buildings, 'typical' activities or 'typical' landscapes in marketing content. It should also be representative of the destination, if this is not the case, the region can be perceived as 'not authentic', just as claiming to be authentic. Perceived authenticity is, however, not only relevant for what is shown in marketing content, it is also perceived by the way marketing and authenticity in marketing are used by service providers. When marketing is discrete and implicit, authenticity is also perceived by tourists as is shown at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* This can be used by service providers as a strategy. Although it seems like tourists are not aware of or influenced by marketing and marketing content of service providers, it still has an important influence on how tourists perceive the area or business as being authentic or not.

6.4. Further More …

Due to the use of semi-structured interviews and the openness of the interview questions, an additional finding of importance came up. This finding indirectly brings up additional information important for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* As an important aim of this study is to produce additional information about tourism and tourism process at the destination, these findings will be discussed as well.

An additional finding is that there is a lack of involvement and motivation of service providers to meet the tourist demand. The area is well-known for its service providers to have taken tourism and tourists for granted. This is why the FTLB has set in a place these promotional strategies such as the four values and a mobilization of actors in order to improve the quality of service at the destination. Achieving this also needs for the strategies to be communicated to service providers and locals, but this is not done efficiently. The FTLB also mentions noticing that several service providers do try to apply these strategies, but that the mentality is still limiting the achievement of the goal. The communication strategies from the FTLB should be directly communicated with service providers in a way to grab their attention. This is important as the FTLB promotes the region to be enchanting and amazing through its well-being, authenticity, enchantment and sharing values, but the involvement of service providers (Weiler & Walker, 2014) in providing these elements is more important than that of the FTLB. As Kolb (2017) mentions the importance of meeting the demand of tourists realistically, it is important for all actors in the region to coordinate their strategies in order to meet the demand in a coordinated way. More consistency in the way service providers represent the destination brand can result in higher added value for their business and the region.

6.5. Does the way service providers perceive and use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content on media match tourists' perceived authenticity?"

This is the question this study aims at answering. The study aimed primarily at interpreting the way tourists perceive authenticity on marketing content and the way service providers use the concept of authenticity in their marketing content. The main answer to this is, however, how these two perspectives of authenticity on marketing content meet at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* This section also works as the conclusion of this report.

Service providers and tourists each have a personal way of 'perceiving authenticity' as they relate differently to the region. However, each refers to some extent to the same broader understanding of the concept. This is in line with what Chhabra (2005) suggests about different perspectives of what perceived authenticity is, but this study adds that this broader understanding can also be relevant when it comes to marketing content. The way service providers apply the concept of authenticity in their marketing content does meet perceived authenticity of tourists of marketing content. This is true when considering a broader understanding of the concept. This broader understanding relevant for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* seems to be what is 'typical' and 'original'. Service providers try to add these elements to their marketing content not only because they expect it to be what tourists seek, but also because it represents their own ideas and beliefs about the region. Tourists, on the other hand, have also some expectations about what the area should be like and how it should be represented on marketing content, but these expectations change or get reinforced by the perception of authenticity of service providers presented on marketing content (Kolb, 2017). For *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* it is thus a two-way process which results in a match between the way service providers apply their perception of authenticity in marketing content and the way tourists perceive authenticity on marketing content of service providers. Pine and Gilmore (1998) already discussed the importance of the involvement of service providers in providing the service to tourists. This study adds that their involvement is important also when it comes to marketing content as it will influence the experience of tourists and how they perceive authenticity.

The concept of authenticity is used in marketing content implicitly as discussed by Pine and Gilmore (2012). The concept is often used and perceived in an unconscious way by service providers and tourists at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* Service providers are aware that they use several 'elements' which represent the region well, but they are, however, not fully aware of their strategies as being a way to apply authenticity. Tourists do not consciously perceive authenticity within marketing content of service providers, but if the question is asked, they do perceive it from marketing content. It is not entirely conscious as there are also several service providers using the term in their marketing content, but not necessarily in a strategic way. It is interesting to see that neither service providers nor tourists consciously perceive authenticity in marketing content, but perceive authenticity when they are asked to about it later on. While scholars have tried to define and categorize the concept of authenticity, this study shows how messy the concept still remains in research, but also in practice. At *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* the concept has more relevance on the theoretical level (FTLB) than on the practical level. This finding goes in line with Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2008), that perceived authenticity is very subjective, especially on marketing content, and can still be perceived as authentic even if it isn't authentic. In this case, it isn't a matter of authentic or not, but a matter of being consciously perceived or not.

It is through the use and the perception of certain elements which stir up a feeling of 'authenticity' that the concept is used in marketing content. These elements have already been discussed by Pine and Gilmore (2007) who suggest that the use of such elements can stir up perceived authenticity of tourists and this is supported by Chhabra (2003) and Mura and Lovelock (2009). This study thus adds that elements which stir up authenticity (Chhabra, 2003; Mura & Lovelock, 2009) are also relevant to marketing content, but can be destination specific. For *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* elements used by service providers in their marketing content represent what is 'typical' and representative of the area, such as images of typical buildings, activities, products, etc. These elements are also relevant for tourists at the destination and can consequently be relevant for perceived authenticity of tourists on marketing content as Pine and Gilmore (2007) suggest. The elements used by service providers are based on their own perspectives, experiences, ideas about the area, but do also try to meet the expectations of tourists through the use of symbols and elements as Echtner and Prasad (2003) suggest. Therefore, the elements used by service providers in marketing content meet to some extent in a broader category perceived authenticity of tourists.

As for last, a strategy which stirs up perceived authenticity of tourists is the way marketing content is provided to them. Pine and Gilmore (2012) say it is important to use the concept implicitly, but this study also shows that the small amount of marketing, in general, can also be perceived as authentic by tourists. Tourists at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* have pointed out the importance of not claiming to be authentic, and so does the FTLB. There are however several service providers who use the term in their marketing content. Tourists also explain the enjoyment of a lack of marketing, and especially advertisement, at the destination which makes it more authentic. Therefore, using the concept implicitly but also reducing the amount of advertisement at the destination is very important in order to be 'authentic'. From a societal point of view, this study adds that it is really important for service providers not to claim to be authentic and to consciously manage their marketing content and amount in order to remain authentic at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne.* This is however not yet the case in the area, as service providers not all consciously apply these strategies. Additionally, the different types of authenticity

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identified by scholars such as Wang (1999) and Reisinger and Steiner (2006) appear to be intermingled to some extent. Perceiving authenticity in the area as objective, constructed or existential, does not exclude seeing it also as objective and constructed and existential based on different elements and processes stirring up these types. This process is also relevant on marketing content as service providers attempt to share their perception of authenticity through the use of elements stirring up tourists' perceived authenticity. The elements shown on marketing content need to meet the tourist demand but also need to remain 'true' to the area.

7.   Limitations

Several limitations were encountered during this study which need to be addressed. First of all, this study is not strong enough to be representative nor to be generalized to the rest of the population. This is because this is a case study and is thus situationally bound. However, this study has been conducted in order to have a better understanding of the different interplays between stakeholders and the way they relate to each other through the concepts of authenticity and marketing. It does indeed describe the situation for a specific set of stakeholders and a specific location, but just as Adler and Clark (2011) explain, this is also an attempt to "understand broader categories of the social world". The aim of this study was primarily to interpret the data collected, which it did for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne*. A case study is also not replicable. The outcomes from the case study cannot be replicated in another place as the case study only exists because of the context in which the case is taking place. For this study, the way each stakeholder relates to the concept of authenticity and marketing and the way they relate with each other only exist due to the context in which these elements are taking place. Reproducing this study at a different location for a comparative study (for example) would thus not be possible without considering every variable for this area and for the new location.

The use of semi-structured interviews as main data collection method also brings up limitations relating to validity. As Clark and Adler (2011) explain, the interviewer during an interview also brings his own values, knowledge, and perspectives. The way the questions are formulated and asked influence the way the interviewees will answer the questions. This study was set up in English, but the interviews were conducted in Dutch and in French as these were the languages the interviewees preferred to use. Although a list of questions was set up beforehand, some of them were translated from English to French or Dutch resulting in an eventual use of words which take a different meaning depending on the language it is used in. Another possible limitation is that of miscommunication or misunderstandings during the interviews. The interviewer might have used words with a specific meaning in mind while the interviewee might have used another meaning for that same word. The last limitation to discuss with the use of interviews in the case of this study is the fact that the answers can only be compared to a certain extent. As each interviewee answered the questions asked based on their personal values, meanings, and perspectives, they might have understood the questions slightly differently than other interviewees might have.

Limitations concerning the sample have also been relevant for this study. Although as many interviewees as possible would have been good for the sake of the study, a choice needed to be made. Contacting service providers through email seemed to be the ideal way, but has not delivered as many responses as expected. The response level was very low. Only three interviews were conducted with service providers which have appeared to be full of relevant information despite the small sample size. The expectation was to gather the same amount of interviews from the tourist perspective. This has appeared to be even more complicated then contacting service providers. The reason was mainly that tourists did not want to loose so much time from their trip, which is understandable. However, two

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interviewees agreed on doing an interview, but the opportunities to contact additional tourists did not come on time. There is, therefore, an imbalance between the two perspectives which results in more information from the service provider perspective than from the tourist perspective. From the literature review, it was explained that more knowledge is available about the tourist perspective than from the service provider perspective. It is therefore fortunate to some extent that more data was collected from service providers as their perspective on the concept of authenticity was identified as an important gap in research.

8.   Suggestions for further research

This study is an explorative case study which attempts to understand how service providers and tourists perceive authenticity at the same destination. Several findings came up, but there are some suggestions for further research which can be mentioned. The most important further research that needs to be done is a follow-up research on this study in order to be able to generalize the findings to a wider population. This study only opens the discussion in order to stir up attention on the topic of 'perceived authenticity' and how each stakeholder relates to it, and to one another. This study should be applied to a larger population, eventually the entire Ardennes region, in order to see the outcome when a larger sample is involved and whether the outcomes are only relevant for *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne,* or for the Ardennes or for other destinations.

This study has focused mainly on the interpretations of the perception of authenticity of each service providers and tourists. It has not considered how demographics such as age, country of origin, travel experiences or living experiences, etc. These factors can have an important influence on the way these stakeholders have built their perception of authenticity and the way they understand and apply it to a region or business. It would be thus interesting to have a closer look at these factors when analyzing the two groups. Understanding the influence these factors could have on the way a person builds and maintain its perception of authenticity could fill gaps of knowledge about the process of building perceived authenticity. This could be done again through the use of in-depth interviews which would focus on demographical factors and perceived authenticity, but with a larger sample size. Doing such a study could also go further by applying perceived authenticity on marketing content in order to see how demographics influence the way people perceive authenticity in marketing. This would help develop strategies based on the demographics of public visiting a specific region or business.

As second interesting follow-up study would be that of identifying the exact elements which create perceived authenticity in the Belgian Ardennes. As Chhabra (2005), and Mura and Lovelock (2009) mention, there are several elements which stir up perceived authenticity. Pine and Gilmore (2007) add to this that applying these elements in marketing will influence the perception of authenticity by tourists. Therefore, understand what the elements stirring up authenticity at the destination are can help service providers improve their advertisement in order to meet even better the tourist expectations and demand at the destination or the business. This will also influence in general the way tourists might perceive the

destination or the business, which can help the tourism promotion office achieve its goal of improving the image of the region in general. The outcomes provided in this study do unfortunately not focus enough on the identifying the elements which could stir up authenticity and how tourists use these elements in constructing perceived authenticity.

A third and last interesting follow-up study would be that of focusing on how tourists at *La Vallée de l'Ourthe et de l'Aisne* perceive authenticity relating to the nature present. During the interviews of this study, nature has been identified as 'authentic'. Nature is also an important aspect and a main selling point of the region. It would be therefore interesting to understand how tourists relate the concept of authenticity with nature. Depending on how 'authenticity' and 'nature' relate to each other, this could help the tourism promotion office and service providers use these two elements strategically at the destination, in their business, and in their marketing strategies. Consequently, putting forward the authenticity of nature at the destination could develop the importance to maintain and valorize the nature even more, which could add an image of sustainability to the destination. This is a goal the FTLB still tries to achieve. Understanding exactly how 'authenticity' and 'nature' relate to each other would help create specific strategies to achieve this goal.

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