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Perceptions of authenticity in a Malaysian homestay – A narrative analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants' narratives highlight that the homestay is perceived as authentic.
- Guests refer to perceptions of 'objective' and 'existential' authenticity.
- Guests enjoy 'authenticity' only for short periods of time.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the plethora of studies about authenticity in tourism and homestays in Malaysia, little is known about tourists' perceptions of authenticity in the Malaysian homestay experience. This paper attempts to address this gap by focussing on guests' narratives of authenticity in a Malaysian homestay experience. As narratives can be the object and the method of inquiry, this study employs narrative analysis to deconstruct and analyse tourists' narratives. Grounded on an interpretivist frame of inquiry, the empirical material is obtained from internet blogs and on-line interviews. Overall, the analysis of narratives suggests that the whole experience is in general described as 'authentic' by the guests. However, the findings also show that 'authenticity-triggering' experiences should not last for long periods of time as guests seem to be keen to compromise their comforts only for short periods of time.

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1. Introduction

In general the term 'homestay' refers to a variety of accommodation types, such as bed and breakfasts and small hotels, in which tourists have the possibility to stay with the locals and experience their culture (Gu & Wong, 2006; Lynch, 2005). It is a form of tourism consumption that in the last twenty years has become quite popular among tourists and travellers, especially in rural areas (Moscardo, 2009). The development of homestay programmes in rural areas has been encouraged by public and private tourism-related enterprises with the intent to stimulate local economies and enhance rural lifestyles (Liu, 2006). In this respect, homestay has been seen as a way of promoting local development through tourism (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013).

This discourse, which also reiterates the necessity of filling the social and economic gap between urban and rural areas, has been

prominent in several countries (see Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Gu & Wong, 2006; Jones & Guan, 2011; Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2013), including Malaysia (Jamal, Othman, & Muhammad, 2011; Kayat, 2002; Liu, 2006). Within the Malaysian context, the presumed success of homestay programmes is often linked to increased numbers of both domestic and international tourists participating in this form of tourism consumption (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Due to the assumed economic impacts of this form of tourism, it is not surprising that homestay programmes have received attention by scholars (see Kayat, 2002; Liu, 2006; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Yet, its social and cultural implications on Malaysian rural communities still remain ambiguous.

One aspect of this form of tourism consumption that has not been fully investigated concerns the relationship between Malaysian homestays and 'authenticity'. By promoting 'traditional' and 'genuine' ways of life, homestays in Malaysia promise tourists 'authentic' experiences that go beyond the mere provision of a type of accommodation. The nexus between authenticity and homestays

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in Malaysia is highly reiterated by tourism promotional material. *Tourism Malaysia (2014)*, for example, promotes homestays on its website in the following way:

Experiencing a homestay in a traditional village or “kampong” [Malaysian word for village] is perhaps one of the fastest and easiest ways to get to know the real Malaysia. [...] Experience the charm of Malay traditions that have been preserved throughout the ages.

Similarly, *go2homestay*, the official website for Homestay Malaysia endorsed by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, promotes homestays as ‘a learning experience with lots of activities, nice food and the authentic feel of true kampong stay...’.

By using words like ‘real’, ‘traditional’, ‘preserved’ and ‘authentic’, much promotional material implicitly and explicitly tends to reiterate commoditised representations of homestays, often staged in a rural past, which may play an important role in seducing and attracting the Western tourist gaze as well as the non-Western urban gaze. Authenticity is a topic that has been highly debated and contested in tourism studies. Indeed, the burgeoning literature on this topic has led some researchers to claim that the word ‘authenticity’ itself has become meaningless (*Reisinger & Steiner, 2006*). However, despite the plethora of studies about authenticity in tourism (*Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976; Mura & Lovelock, 2009; Pearce & Moscardo, 1986; Wang, 1999*) and homestays in Malaysia (*Kayat, 2002; Liu, 2006; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013*), little is known about tourists’ perceptions of authenticity in the Malaysian homestay experience. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by focussing on tourists’ narratives of homestay experiences in Malaysia.

As ‘[n]arrative can be the object of inquiry, the method of inquiry or the product of inquiry’ (*Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 201*), this paper employs narrative analysis to deconstruct and analyse tourists’ narratives of authenticity during their homestay experiences. In this respect, the contribution of this work is twofold. First, this research sheds light on tourists’ narratives concerning perceptions of ‘authenticity’ in Malaysian homestays, a topic neglected by tourism scholars. Second, this paper also contributes to the body of knowledge from a methodological perspective as it analyses tourists’ perceptions of authenticity through a powerful, yet often ignored, method of inquiry, namely narrative analysis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Narratives

Narrative inquiry has received much attention from scholars within the social sciences (*Brushwood Rose & Granger, 2013; Conle, 1997; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Joseph, 2014*). In general, the interest on narratives has been motivated by the idea that individuals make sense of their ‘realities’ through the stories they tell and hear (*Smith & Sparkes, 2006*). From a sociological perspective, *Gubrium and Holstein (2009, p. 7)* claim that individual narratives mirror social structures as ‘individual accounts add up to something more than biographical particulars, namely, stories of social worlds on their own terms’. In contrast, psychological approaches to narratives contemplate the idea that storytelling is an important tool for the (re)production and negotiation of individuals’ ‘selves’ (*Crossley, 2000*). From this perspective, narratives tell more about an individual’s ‘inner self’ than his/her external social world. Importantly, these two seemingly antithetical theories should not be conceptualised as isolated approaches. Rather, it needs to be recognised that narratives can provide important information about both ‘self’ and its social environment (*Riessman, 1993*). In this

respect, narrativity is ‘a conduit to, if not constitutive of, domains of social and psychological experience that are otherwise hidden’ (*Gubrium and Holstein's, 2009, p. 8*).

Storytelling is a socially and culturally driven process throughout which events are temporally organized according to a plot (*Orbuch, 1997*). This temporal order allows both teller and audience to (de)construct social reality into meaningful and understandable experiences, which otherwise would be ephemeral to them and others (*Arntson & Droge, 1987*). Narratives should be conceptualized as constructs that not only represent but also (re)produce ‘realities’ over specific socio-cultural spaces and times (*Bruner, 1991*).

Bruner (1991, p. 9) refers to ‘narrative seduction’ and ‘narrative banalization’ as processes that make narratives socially and culturally conventional and thus generally accepted by individuals and social groups. However, the cultural legitimacy and normativity of a narrative may also be subject to interpretation, contestation, and negotiation (*Czarniawska, 2004*). In this respect, a topic or discourse may be informed by divergent narratives, which may construct ‘competing’ or conflicting realities on the same matter. Importantly, realities (and their informing narratives) are legitimized or delegitimized by structures of power (*Foucault, 1982*), which play an important role during the production, reiteration, contestation, and representation of narratives. Because dominant discourses as well as identities vary over space and time (*Czarniawska, 2004*), it is not erroneous to consider narratives (and their interpretations) as dynamic (rather than static) constructs.

How narratives are told by the story teller also plays an important role in how the audience receives and accepts them. As the acceptance (or not acceptance) of scripts is based on tellers’ performances, story-telling should be conceptualized as a performative act whereby a social actor tries to persuade others (*Chase, 2011*).

2.2. Narratives in tourism studies

Tourism scholars have approached the study of narratives from the three different perspectives discussed by *Ewick and Silbey (1995, p. 201)*. The first has contemplated the notion of narrative as object of inquiry. In this regard, there has been an abundant production of literature within tourism studies that has focused on the narratives produced by the tourists before, during and after the tourism experience (see for example *Cary, 2004; Elsrud, 2001; McCabe & Foster, 2006; Nimrod, 2008; Noy, 2004; Rickly-Boyd, 2009; Tucker, 2005*). It has been argued that tourists employ a ‘narrativistic’ attitude in describing their tourist experiences in order to give meaning to their journeys (*McCabe & Foster, 2006*). Also, narratives are means throughout which tourists construct their identities both on holiday and at home (*Tucker, 2005*).

From an ontological perspective, tourist narratives raise conceptual issues as the focus on language tends to neglect the role of the ‘body’ in the tourism experience. In this respect, several scholars have emphasised the ‘corporeality’ of the tourism experience (*Crouch, 1999; Crouch & Desforges, 2003; Obrador Pons, 2003; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994*). Despite this, studies on virtual tourism and hyperreal experiences (*Hobson & Williams, 1995; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015; Urry, 2002; Williams & Hobson, 1995*) have also problematized and questioned the corporeal dimension of tourist experiences. One may argue that the body still plays a role in tourist accounts when a narrative is the product of a performative interaction between a storyteller and a listener (*Edensor, 2000*). Within this scenario, the body (gestures, facial expression) may play an important role in persuading the audience (*Chase, 2011*). However, the production of narratives is not necessarily dependent on tourists’ encounters. Diaries and blogs, for example,

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