Digital Mediation and Community Narratives in Heritage Tourism: Reframing Authenticity in Melaka, Malaysia

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Abstract.
This study examines how digital media and grassroots community participation mediate the experience of authenticity in Melaka, Malaysia, a UNESCO World Heritage city. Drawing on qualitative interviews with twenty participants, we apply the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) to interpret findings. CASM conceptualizes authenticity as a continuum rather than a binary, allowing analysis of experiences ranging from staged tourist pseudo-events to spontaneous local encounters. Tourists in Melaka reported mixed responses: many were influenced by curated social media imagery and enjoyed colorful spectacles, while others sought deeper connections through unscripted interactions with residents. Local stakeholders described balancing digital promotions and event staging with efforts to maintain cultural integrity, including community-led tours and consultative heritage branding. Key themes include the tension between spectacle and substance, the impact of social media versus on-site "analog" intimacy, and community empowerment versus marginalization. The study connects these insights with theories of staged and existential authenticity, showing how digital technology can both enhance and dilute perceived authenticity, and how community narratives can reclaim heritage meaning. Recommendations include co-creating tourism experiences with local communities, using digital storytelling to educate rather than simply entertain, and implementing policies that support authenticity alongside innovation. This research extends authenticity theory through the CASM framework and offers practical guidance for sustainable heritage tourism management in Southeast Asia.

Kata Kunci:
*Pariwisata digital,
Partisipasi
masyarakat,
Otentisitas,
Pariwisata warisan.*

Abstrak.
Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana media digital dan partisipasi masyarakat memediasi pengalaman otentisitas di Melaka, Malaysia, sebuah kota Warisan Dunia UNESCO. Berdasarkan wawancara kualitatif dengan dua puluh responden, kami menerapkan Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) untuk menginterpretasi hasil penelitian. CASM memandang otentisitas sebagai spektrum, bukan kategori biner, sehingga memungkinkan analisis pengalaman mulai dari pseudo-events hingga interaksi spontan dengan warga lokal. Wisatawan di Melaka melaporkan respons yang beragam. Tema utama merangkumi dampak media sosial versus keakraban "analog" secara langsung. Studi ini menghubungkan temuan tersebut dengan teori otentisitas staged (yang direkayasa) dan existential (eksistensial), memperlihatkan bagaimana teknologi digital dapat memperkaya sekaligus mereduksi persepsi otentisitas, serta bagaimana narasi komunitas dapat merebut kembali makna warisan budaya. Rekomendasi penelitian ini mencakup kolaborasi dengan masyarakat dalam menciptakan pengalaman wisata, menggunakan digital storytelling untuk edukasi, bukan hanya hiburan, serta menerapkan kebijakan yang mendukung otentisitas bersama inovasi. Penelitian ini memperluas teori otentisitas melalui kerangka CASM dan menawarkan panduan praktis untuk pengelolaan pariwisata warisan yang berkelanjutan di Asia Tenggara.

1.   Introduction

Heritage tourism destinations must showcase rich cultural histories while meeting modern tourists' expectations. Melaka City in Malaysia, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, exemplifies this tension. Its historic streets and multicultural heritage attract millions of visitors, yet rapid tourism growth has raised concerns about cultural commodification. Melaka's tourism branding increasingly employs pseudo-events where staged, media-friendly attractions are designed for tourist consumption and digital promotions such as social media campaigns and mobile apps are being used to increase visibility. While these strategies boost visitor numbers, scholars warn they risk diluting authenticity (Boorstin, 1961; MacCannell, 1973). The question arises regarding how a heritage destination balances spectacle with substance, ensuring culturally authentic experiences even as it stages events and leverages technology.

This study investigates how tourists and local stakeholders in Melaka perceive and negotiate authenticity amid digital transformation and staged heritage displays. We focus on the interplay between digital media, community narratives, and the evolving concept of authenticity in heritage tourism. The study explores how smart tourism technologies and social media have been implemented in Melaka's heritage tourism, affecting visitor engagement and satisfaction; identifies the types of staged events and attractions employed and their influence on tourists' perceptions of authenticity; examines the alignment between Melaka's curated digital image on social media and travel platforms with visitors' on-site experiences; assesses the outcomes of digital innovations and events introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic; and evaluates strategies that ensure digital and event-driven approaches support authentic heritage interpretation, community involvement, and sustainable tourism growth.

A central framework for this study is the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM), introduced here as an analytical lens. Unlike traditional views treating authenticity as either "real" or "fake," CASM positions authenticity on a continuum between staged spectacle and genuine cultural engagement. This perspective aligns with contemporary tourism theories that emphasize authenticity as negotiable and co-created by hosts and guests (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). Using CASM, we examine where Melaka's varied heritage experiences fall on the spectrum and how digital mediation and community input can shift experiences toward more meaningful, participatory encounters.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   *Authenticity in Heritage Tourism: From Pseudo-Events to Existential Experiences*

Authenticity in tourism has long been discussed, often contrasting staged attractions with genuine culture. Boorstin (1961) introduced the idea of pseudo-events—staged activities designed for tourists that blur reality and spectacle. These events, though entertaining and convenient (Mariani & Giorgio, 2017), risk replacing real culture with artificial displays (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Scholars note pseudo-events keep tourists within a comfortable yet superficial environment (Alshehri, 2024). Conversely, MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity theory argues that tourists actively seek genuine experiences behind curated presentations, often aiming to escape modern alienation. MacCannell used Goffman's (1961) frontstage/backstage metaphor to show that tourists may feel disappointed by obviously staged experiences but can still find satisfaction if an experience feels authentic enough (Egresi, 2016; Supriono et al., 2023). Cohen (1988) expanded authenticity into a continuum, suggesting tourists have varied motivations, with some seeking deep cultural immersion and others prioritizing comfort. He introduced emergent authenticity, where initially staged events become genuinely integrated into local culture (Liu & Chang, 2020; Zhang & Lee, 2021). Wang (1999) differentiated objective authenticity (factually genuine) from existential authenticity (personal,

meaningful engagement), emphasizing authenticity as subjective and experiential. Thus, authenticity is best viewed as a spectrum, informing the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) in this study. CASM treats authenticity as fluid, co-created, and varying by context and engagement, allowing hybrid experiences mixing spectacle and genuine participation.

2.2. *Digital Mediation of Heritage Experiences*

Digital technology significantly transforms heritage tourism through smart tools like mobile apps, AR/VR, and AI, enhancing visitor experiences and management efficiency (Buhalis et al., 2023). AR/VR can vividly present historical sites, attracting tech-savvy tourists and improving satisfaction (Fauzi, Sharif, & Razak, 2022; Ravichandran & Nam, 2024; Zhang, Papp-Váry, & Szabó, 2025). Digital tools like QR codes and interactive exhibits also enhance accessibility (Rozali et al., 2024). Yet, digital use should respect cultural integrity, avoiding trivialization (Pobl, 2020; Zhang et al., 2025). Social media has reshaped tourist expectations and marketing, heavily influencing destination choices through visually appealing content (Abbasi et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). User-generated content and influencer promotions amplify destinations like Melaka, but risk creating overly idealized expectations (Mustika et al., 2024; Tee, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital tourism practices, highlighting the necessity of digital readiness through virtual tours (Kurniasari, Ayu, & Octavanny, 2022; Tee, 2024). Balancing digital enhancement with genuine interactions remains crucial in authentic heritage experiences.

2.3. *Community Participation and Authentic Heritage Narratives*

Community involvement is critical for authenticity and sustainability in heritage tourism. Traditional destination branding often oversimplifies culture for tourist appeal, raising concerns about cultural trivialization (Almalki, 2023; Greenwood, 1977). Ethical branding involves local communities in storytelling, ensuring truthful and inclusive narratives (Chang et al., 2024; Chhabra, 2023). Melaka's branding strategy, involving community input, highlights cultural diversity authentically. Community-based tourism empowers locals as active heritage interpreters, creating richer and more genuine visitor experiences. This "negotiated authenticity" approach ensures tourism reflects genuine local practices, as in Melaka's Kampung Morten homestay program. Such community-driven tourism improves visitor respect and satisfaction, fostering responsible behaviors (Chhabra, 2023; Chung & Day, 2024). Local activism further helps maintain cultural integrity against commercialization. In summary, authenticity in heritage tourism is shaped by tourist expectations, digital mediation, and community participation. CASM will help evaluate Melaka's tourism practices, balancing spectacle and genuine community engagement to sustainably reframe authenticity.

3.   Methodology

This research employed a qualitative single-case study design, focusing on Melaka City's heritage tourism context. Within this single case, we examined two embedded units of analysis: (1) the tourist experience, and (2) the local stakeholder perspective. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm allowed us to capture the nuanced meanings and interpretations that different participants assign to the concept of authenticity in Melaka's evolving tourism scene. The primary data source was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We conducted twenty interviews in total: ten with tourists who visited Melaka in 2023–2024, and ten with local stakeholders including tour guides, heritage site managers, small business owners, community leaders, and tourism officials. We used purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Tourists interviewed varied in origin (local Malaysians and international visitors from various countries), age (ranging from early 20s to mid 60s), and travel style. Stakeholders were drawn from both government and private sectors, as well as grassroots community initiatives, to represent different facets of Melaka's tourism ecosystem.

Interviews took place on-site in Melaka's heritage zones between August 2023 and February 2024. We chose face-to-face interviews in locations such as museums, historic streets, and community areas to put participants at ease and spark context-rich discussion. Two tailored interview guides were developed: one for tourists and one for stakeholders, with open-ended questions covering several key topics. Tourist interviews explored how visitors discovered Melaka (e.g. through digital media or word-of-mouth), their expectations of the city's heritage, experiences with any tours or events, use of digital tools during their visit, and moments they found especially authentic or inauthentic. For example, tourists were asked, *"What images or stories had you heard about Melaka before coming, and did your experience match those expectations?"* and *"Can you describe a moment on your trip that felt very authentic or, conversely, very 'touristy' to you?"* Stakeholder interviews asked about how they present local culture to tourists, the role and design of staged events or performances, how they incorporate technology or social media in their operations, and how they handle the balance between promoting tourism and preserving cultural authenticity. A sample question was, *"In promoting Melaka's heritage, how do you decide what aspects of culture to highlight or simplify for tourists?"* We also specifically inquired about changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as virtual tours or new marketing strategies, and any community involvement in these initiatives.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To supplement the interviews, we also engaged in direct observation and field notes. The researcher attended and observed several relevant sites and events in Melaka: for instance, an evening at the Jonker Street night market, a heritage village walk in Kampung Morten, and a popular river cruise tour. These observations provided contextual background and allowed triangulation of the interview data. Field notes captured descriptions of tourist behavior, use of smartphones or cameras, interactions between tourists and locals, and any apparent staging or modifications of cultural displays for tourism. Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Each participant received an explanation of the study's purpose and gave informed consent. Identities have been kept confidential by using descriptors (e.g. "Tourist 5, UK, age 27" or "Stakeholder 2, Tourism Board member") instead of real names. We remained reflexive during interviews, being mindful of our role as researchers and the potential power dynamics. We encouraged honest responses, clarifying that there were no right or wrong answers and that our interest was in personal perceptions.

4.   Findings

The findings are organized into two main sections which are Tourist Perspectives and Stakeholder Perspectives to distinguish between the visitor experience and the local management of authenticity. Within each section, we present key themes supported by representative quotations. We then identify cross-cutting dialectical tensions that emerged when comparing tourist and stakeholder viewpoints.

4.1.   *Tourist Perspectives: Discovery, Expectations, and Authentic Encounters*

Many tourists discovered Melaka through digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and travel blogs, which shaped their expectations of it as an authentic and charming heritage site. A traveler from Singapore shared, *"I decided to come after seeing gorgeous photos of Jonker Street and the colorful lights by the river… It all looked so charming and legit."* (Tourist 3, female, 28, Singapore). Similarly, a German backpacker recalled, *"Travel blogs called Melaka a 'must-visit for culture lovers.' They talked about the mix of Malay, Chinese, and European influences… By the time I arrived, I already had a mental image drawn from those online posts."* (Tourist 7, male, 31, Germany). These curated digital impressions often created emotional expectations of nostalgia and romantic history, though the on-site reality sometimes clashed with them. A tourist from Australia felt these expectations were met when he walked through Kampung Morten and described it as *"just as I hoped… wooden houses, birds chirping, a lady watering her garden. I felt*

like I had walked into a living museum." (Tourist 1, male, 55, Australia). However, others encountered dissonance. A visitor from the UK shared, *"I expected Melaka to be tranquil, but Jonker Street in the afternoon was packed with tourists… It was more like a carnival than the calm heritage vibe I imagined."* (Tourist 5, female, 27, UK). She later returned early in the morning and found the quieter atmosphere aligned better with her expectations, saying, *"Suddenly I could appreciate the old buildings and imagine the past… I finally felt the charm I was looking for."*

Personal backgrounds also shaped perceptions of authenticity. A Malaysian tourist said, *"Kampung Morten reminded me of my grandma's stories… walking there felt like I was walking through a piece of her past. That was very authentic to me, emotionally."* (Tourist 8, female, 24, Malaysia). In contrast, some tourists were more interested in casual enjoyment. *"Honestly, we came for fun. We want to eat, shop, take cool photos… Maybe it didn't feel ancient, but it was exciting and that was enough for us."* (Tourist 4, female, mid-20s, Indonesia). These contrasting attitudes reflect a spectrum of tourist motivations, from deep cultural connection to leisure-focused consumption.

Guided tours received mixed reactions depending on delivery. One Australian tourist described a heritage walk: *"Our guide was a former schoolteacher who grew up here. He told stories not just from the brochure, but personal anecdotes… It felt like the city's history came alive through him. We even learned to drink coffee the local way. Nothing felt forced."* (Tourist 1, Australia). However, other experiences felt overly rehearsed. A German tourist described the river cruise: *"It was a nice night ride because of the lights, but a bit like a theme park… They even played recorded traditional music to set the mood. It was amusing, but I did not feel it was authentic. It was more entertainment than deep learning."* (Tourist 7, male, 31, Germany). Even within staged settings, tourists appreciated moments of spontaneity, such as spotting a wild monitor lizard, which offered contrast to pre-packaged elements. As one noted, *"A little drama keeps it interesting, but I want to learn something true too."*

When asked about their most authentic experiences, many cited spontaneous moments rather than formal attractions. One American tourist recalled, *"I wandered into the mosque courtyard at sunset… There was an older gentleman who noticed me and told me about the mosque's history… That simple conversation… was the highlight of my trip. I felt invited into the community, even if briefly."* (Tourist 10, male, 35, USA). Similarly, Tourist 7 described helping make sambal with a guesthouse owner: *"Learning to make sambal with her felt incredibly authentic, more than eating it in a restaurant… I felt like I got a peek into Melaka home life."* Another visitor shared, *"No tourists around, just kids in uniforms and vendors… The lady made traditional kopi tarik… Sipping that coffee there felt very special, like I found the soul of the city away from the typical spots."* (Tourist 1, Australia). These unplanned interactions, rich in sensory and emotional content, often felt more meaningful than structured activities. Tourists frequently remarked that true authenticity came in moments that *"didn't feel designed for tourists."*

Ultimately, tourists navigated authenticity by comparing digital portrayals with their lived experiences, and many found value in everyday encounters beyond the major attractions. While some were content with fun and spectacle, others sought emotional resonance, personal connection, or a glimpse of local life. These varied perceptions support the idea that authenticity is a complex, deeply subjective experience shaped by context, timing, and individual expectation.

4.2. Stakeholder Perspectives: Curating and Contesting Authenticity

Stakeholders in Melaka including tourism officials, guides, cultural entrepreneurs, and community leaders, play a key role in shaping authenticity in the city's heritage tourism. Their perspectives reveal an ongoing negotiation between simplifying culture for accessibility and preserving its richness. A tour guide (Stakeholder 5) described Melaka's complex history as *"a big book with many chapters"* and admitted, *"I cannot read the whole book… I simplify. Otherwise, they'd be overwhelmed or bored. But I always worry*

I'm oversimplifying and they leave with a cartoon version of our history." Stakeholders acknowledged the need to make content digestible while remaining committed to cultural accuracy. Heritage site managers consult cultural experts and elders to ensure exhibits are respectful, while the tourism board (Stakeholder 2) confirmed, *"We consult experts from each community before creating promotional content."* This reflects a broader effort to maintain ethical representation, balancing curated storytelling with cultural integrity.

Digital tools are embraced to engage visitors, with the tourism board actively running social media campaigns. *"We run Instagram, Facebook, TikTok campaigns… encouraging hashtags like #VisitMelaka,"* explained Stakeholder 2, who emphasized blending fun visuals with historical facts. Augmented reality (AR) apps and QR-coded heritage trails are also being introduced. A tour guide involved in this effort (Stakeholder 5) said it *"could enhance learning, especially for the digital generation."* Yet, stakeholders cautioned that technology should supplement, not replacing human interaction. One guide warned, *"If everyone just follows an app, they might not talk to any locals."* To counter checklist tourism and narrow digital trends, the tourism board promotes lesser-known sites and off-peak visits. These strategies aim to widen engagement beyond the social media hotspots.

Stakeholders also reflected on the commercialization of heritage. A shopkeeper (Stakeholder 7) said, *"I have lived here 60 years… Now Jonker Street is busy and booming, but I barely recognize it… The culture is still here, you see the old buildings, but it feels diluted."* This sentiment reflects fears of gentrification, where original communities are displaced by market-driven tourism. While the tourism board recognizes tourism's benefits, it also sees risks to intangible heritage. Policy responses include zoning limits and incentives for traditional businesses, though enforcement is challenging. Community-led efforts, like Kampung Morten's homestay program, were cited as ways to keep control local and protect authenticity.

Efforts to ensure ethical branding were a strong theme. Stakeholder 2 said, *"We market Melaka as a 'Melting Pot of Cultures' and a 'Living Heritage City.' We avoid gimmicks… we film real events and real people."* A museum curator (Stakeholder 3) emphasized, *"We tell the story of a family's history… We even turned down proposals to host unrelated events in the house because it would cheapen the atmosphere."* Stakeholders believe that honest, inclusive storytelling not only builds trust but also resonates more deeply with modern tourists. However, some shared frustrations with external media misrepresenting local culture. Stakeholder 5 recounted, *"They had the host dress up and staged a 'ritual' that doesn't really happen here. It was cringeworthy."* These experiences reinforced the importance of locals telling their own stories and producing their own content.

Community involvement is seen as vital to sustaining authenticity. A guesthouse owner (Stakeholder 10) said, *"We brand it under community tourism… All promotional content is vetted by the village committee… This actually makes tourists behave more respectfully."* By giving residents narrative control, the experience becomes more authentic and respectful. Grassroots initiatives also play a strong role. Stakeholder 5 leads informal heritage walks sharing personal stories and hidden landmarks. *"It's like showing guests around your own neighborhood,"* he said. These tours offer unscripted experiences that build empathy and awareness.

Other initiatives include a mural arts program led by youth and elders, combining traditional stories with digital QR codes. *"It blended technology with local voice,"* said Stakeholder 8. Heritage NGOs also work on policy, such as color palette regulations and signage rules. Stakeholder 4, a café owner, explained they hold workshops to show businesses the value of heritage-friendly practices. Educators contribute by instilling heritage pride in students, ensuring authenticity is preserved for future generations. *"If they value their heritage, they will protect it,"* said a teacher involved in school heritage clubs. Overall, stakeholders recognize the need to simplify and sometimes stage experiences but strive to root these in real culture and community voices. They embrace digital tools cautiously, resist over-

commercialization, and work toward inclusive branding and education. These efforts reveal a dynamic, multi-level approach to curating authenticity that complements the tourist perspective and reflects shared concerns over spectacle versus substance, digital versus personal experience, and tourism growth versus cultural sustainability.

5.   Cross-Analysis: Alignments, Tensions, and Pathways

Bringing together the insights from tourists and stakeholders reveals several core dialectics that define Melaka's heritage tourism experience. These opposing yet interrelated themes highlight where challenges lie and where opportunities for balance emerge. Spectacle versus substance is a recurring tension. Tourists enjoy Melaka's lively attractions like decorated trishaws, night markets, and cultural shows for their entertainment value, yet some feel these spectacles can overshadow the historical and cultural depth of the city. For example, Tourist 4 from Indonesia appreciated the festive and photo-friendly side of Melaka, while Tourist 1 from Australia sought deeper experiences and adjusted his schedule to find moments of quiet authenticity. Stakeholders echoed these concerns, recognizing that while spectacles are essential for drawing crowds and sustaining the economy, they can dilute cultural meaning if overemphasized. Many are experimenting with hybrid approaches, such as combining performances with explanatory narration or designing tours that mix excitement with education. Using the CASM framework, the aim is to position such experiences mid-spectrum, offering a balance where, for instance, a trishaw ride becomes both entertaining and informative through added historical commentary.

Another key theme is digital amplification versus analog intimacy. Digital media play a central role in shaping tourist expectations and boosting Melaka's visibility. Tourists cited Instagram, travel vlogs, and online guides as major influences on their decision to visit and what to see. While digital tools support national tourism goals and offer convenience, they can result in a filtered experience. Some tourists followed strict digital itineraries, rushing through famous spots without time for spontaneous exploration. Stakeholders observed that excessive screen use can limit personal engagement and reduce opportunities for local interaction. In contrast, moments of analog intimacy like chatting with a vendor or quietly observing daily life often produced the most profound experiences, as in the case of Tourist 10's mosque visit or Tourist 1's encounter at a local coffee stall. Stakeholders emphasized that technology should guide, not replace, real-world engagement. Augmented reality apps are one way they aim to bridge the gap, enhancing site interpretation while keeping tourists physically and emotionally present. Ideally, digital tools should prompt more meaningful on-site behavior, such as encouraging interaction with locals or recommending quieter times for visits.

Community erasure versus reclamation also emerged as a strong theme. Some tourists reported that highly touristic zones felt hollow, with traditional life replaced by souvenir shops. Stakeholder 7, a long-time Jonker Street resident, noted how gentrification had displaced neighbors and changed the neighborhood's character. Yet there are also examples of communities reclaiming tourism. Kampung Morten residents organized homestays and village tours on their own terms, setting community-led guidelines and staffing their own tourism initiatives. Tourists valued these experiences as more authentic because locals were actively shaping the narrative. Stakeholders linked this community agency to better visitor behavior and stronger cultural integrity. By foregrounding residents rather than sidelining them, Melaka can align with UNESCO principles that call for community participation in heritage management. Rather than pushing out local life, involving communities strengthens both experience and authenticity.

The tension between market-driven and ethically negotiated authenticity was also evident. While some practices cater to quick profits such as mass-produced souvenirs or staged photo opportunities, others reflect a conscious commitment to cultural integrity. Stakeholder 7 critiqued tourist demand

for cheap batik magnets that undercut real artisans. On the other hand, stakeholders also cited principled decisions: the Baba & Nyonya Museum rejecting inauthentic events to maintain its atmosphere; guides staying truthful in their stories; and cultural shows retaining tradition despite pressure to simplify. These choices reflect a belief that authenticity sells, in a sense that tourists, especially discerning ones, appreciate honest, meaningful encounters. Ethical approaches also support sustainable tourism: tourists who feel they have had a sincere experience are more likely to leave positive reviews and promote the destination through word-of-mouth. Authenticity, when managed responsibly, becomes both a moral and economic asset.

Overall, authenticity in Melaka is not a fixed attribute but a fluid, ongoing negotiation. The CASM model helps situate experiences along a continuum, allowing room for adjustment and intentional design. A trishaw ride with flashy lights may lean toward spectacle, but adding a conversation with the driver about local history moves it toward substance. A museum may be inherently authentic, but selfie zones or gamified exhibits may bring it closer to the middle of the spectrum. This fluidity opens the door for stakeholders to fine-tune experiences. If something is overly staged, they can infuse more meaning; if something is too dense, they can add elements of fun or accessibility. Melaka already shows signs of this balancing act: tourism board posts that combine striking images with mini history lessons, augmented reality heritage trails that pair digital excitement with real-world presence, homestays that blend comfort with local life, and night market performances that are shortened and explained to maintain attention while honoring culture. These examples demonstrate that thoughtful design can preserve authenticity while keeping tourism vibrant. In the next section, we explore how these insights connect to broader theories and offer recommendations for managing authenticity in Melaka and similar heritage destinations.

6.   Discussion

The findings from Melaka confirm and expand existing theories of authenticity in tourism. We observed both Boorstin's and MacCannell's ideas at play: some tourists embraced staged attractions without concern for authenticity, while others actively sought deeper, meaningful connections. Tourist 5's experience highlights this tension where she felt let down by the commercial atmosphere of Jonker Street but later found authenticity by returning at a quieter time. This supports MacCannell's notion of frontstage and backstage experiences and shows how timing and approach can shift perceptions. Our data also aligned with Cohen's theory of authenticity as a spectrum. Tourists displayed diverse motivations, from those seeking fun to those pursuing cultural immersion. Some were satisfied with surface-level enjoyment, while others valued personal, emotional moments. Cohen's idea of emergent authenticity was reflected in how some staged practices, like the trishaw rides, were embraced over time by locals, gaining new meaning and cultural value. Wang's distinction between objective and existential authenticity was particularly useful. Tourists often felt more connected during spontaneous, emotional encounters rather than when observing real but passive heritage objects. Experiences like cooking sambal or chatting at a mosque provided rich personal meaning, reinforcing that authenticity is often about emotional engagement, not just historical accuracy.

A newer dimension is the role of digital media. Tourists often arrived with expectations shaped by social media, sometimes leading to disappointment when reality didn't match. This supports concerns that digital imagery can distort authenticity. Yet, stakeholders in Melaka are using digital platforms to educate and prepare tourists by including real stories and historical context. Digital media, when used ethically, can enhance authenticity by setting accurate expectations and supporting real-world experiences. Tools like QR-coded murals and AR apps show how technology can connect people to deeper stories and encourage genuine engagement. The Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) proved useful in interpreting these experiences. It allowed us to place tourist encounters

along a spectrum from spectacle to substance, showing how even staged events can feel authentic when approached thoughtfully. A flashy trishaw ride, for example, gained authenticity when a tourist engaged in meaningful conversation with the driver. The model helps move past rigid definitions, allowing for a more flexible view of authenticity that matches the mixed realities of modern tourism. Melaka's tourism offerings often sit in the middle of this spectrum, blending entertainment and cultural depth. This suggests that authenticity is not fixed but shaped by context, behavior, and design choices.

In summary, Melaka reflects and extends key theories in heritage tourism by highlighting the influence of digital media, the power of community involvement, and the usefulness of viewing authenticity as a continuum. Experiences are shaped not just by place and object, but by how people engage with them digitally, emotionally, and socially. CASM helps make sense of this complexity, offering a practical way to analyze and improve tourism experiences by encouraging a better balance between fun and meaning.

To support authentic heritage tourism, Melaka and similar destinations should take several steps. First, involve communities in tourism planning and storytelling to ensure culture is represented accurately and respectfully. Local advisory panels can guide tour content, museum exhibits, and marketing. Second, support co-created experiences where locals lead tours, run homestays, and share traditional skills. This brings visitors closer to real cultural practices and benefits local livelihoods. Third, design events that balance entertainment and education. Brief explanations before performances or integrating cultural elements into shows can make staged events more meaningful. Fourth, use digital media as an interpretive tool. Apps and QR codes should offer personal stories and cultural context, not just flashy visuals. Online marketing should include educational content and real voices to set honest expectations.

Fifth, encourage slow travel and offline moments. Promote quiet, reflective activities and longer stays to foster deeper engagement. Sixth, manage tourist flows to protect local life. Spread visitors across more sites, set caps in sensitive areas, and provide reminders about respectful behavior. Seventh, ensure tourism profits reach communities. Help local vendors and artisans access tourists directly, and offer financial support to businesses preserving cultural traditions. Eighth, adopt ethical marketing standards. Avoid exoticized portrayals; instead, feature real people and stories. Marketers should highlight local culture bearers with dignity and context. Ninth, train tourism workers in authentic storytelling and cultural sensitivity. Well-informed guides and front-liners can make any tour more meaningful.

Lastly, monitor authenticity regularly. Collect feedback from tourists and locals about what feels real or forced, and adjust accordingly. Include authenticity measures in site inspections and community-based tourism certifications. Together, these actions help ensure that Melaka's heritage remains vibrant and respected. By blending digital innovation with community leadership, destinations can offer rich, genuine experiences where tourists connect with living culture and not just curated displays. Authenticity then becomes an evolving, shared experience that benefits everyone involved.

7.   Conclusion

This study explored how Melaka balances spectacle and authenticity in heritage tourism. Using qualitative interviews and the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM), we found that authenticity is not fixed but shaped by context, perception, and engagement. Experiences in Melaka exist along a continuum between staged events and authentic encounters. A trishaw ride, for example, can feel theatrical but become meaningful through genuine interaction with the driver. The CASM model helps map these hybrid experiences and suggests ways to enhance them. Tourist motivations

vary. Some seek deep, cultural experiences and adjust their behavior to find them, while others enjoy surface-level attractions. Most fall somewhere in between. This diversity means heritage sites should offer layered experiences where it can be simple enjoyment for some, and deeper engagement for others. Events and attractions should cater to a range of expectations without compromising cultural integrity.

Staged events and pseudo-attractions have both benefits and risks. They can attract visitors and boost visibility, but if overly commercial or disconnected from culture, they may disappoint. Involving local communities in design and pairing events with educational elements can preserve authenticity while keeping things engaging. Spectacle itself isn't the issue, it's when it lacks cultural substance that problems arise. Digital media shapes expectations and behavior. While it helps promote Melaka, it often creates idealized images that don't match reality. Technology should enhance, not distract from, the authentic experience. Tools like AR apps and QR codes can provide historical context and connect visitors to real stories. Ethical digital storytelling and mindful design can help guide tourists to deeper, more personal connections. Community life plays a major role in perceived authenticity. Tourists reported feeling more connected in areas where locals were visibly present. Grassroots efforts like community museums and local-run tours empower residents and enrich the visitor experience.

When communities actively shape tourism, authenticity improves for everyone. Supporting these initiatives helps protect living heritage and ensures locals benefit from tourism. Ethical branding also matters. Stakeholders in Melaka are moving toward marketing that includes real people and stories, respects cultural nuance, and avoids caricatures. This approach appeals to modern, culturally aware travelers and builds long-term trust. Promoting authenticity in this way can be both ethically sound and commercially smart. Our research contributes by showing how CASM helps interpret modern tourism complexities. It confirms earlier theories and adds new insight into how digital tools and community action shape authenticity. Combining tourist and stakeholder views revealed how supply and demand interact to create the tourist experience. While based on a single case with limited scope, the findings offer practical value.

Future research could compare different destinations, explore digital existential authenticity, or follow how perceptions change over time. Melaka shows that authenticity is not a simple choice between real and fake, but an ongoing process shaped by choices made by everyone involved. By being intentional with design, storytelling, and digital tools, stakeholders can support meaningful cultural exchanges while still attracting diverse audiences. Embracing authenticity as a spectrum offers a flexible, inclusive way forward for heritage tourism in a changing world.

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