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Whose Authenticity? Exploring Host–Guest Interactions in Cultural Tourism Experiences in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how cultural authenticity is constructed and negotiated through host–guest interactions in Indonesian tourism settings. While authenticity has long been a central concept in tourism research, much of the existing literature treats it as either an objective attribute of cultural products or a subjective perception held by tourists. This study instead emphasizes authenticity as a relational process that emerges in encounters between hosts and visitors. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with local performers, artisans, and cultural guides, as well as in-depth conversations with domestic and international tourists in selected cultural destinations in Bali and Lombok. Participant observation of performances, festivals, and heritage sites complemented the interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns: first, hosts often engage in strategic performances that balance cultural pride with commercial expectations; second, tourists' perceptions of authenticity vary, with some seeking immersion in local traditions while others prefer commodified representations; third, tensions arise when host communities feel pressured to alter or simplify traditions to meet visitor demand.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has long been recognized as one of the most dynamic sectors of global tourism, offering travelers opportunities to engage with heritage, traditions, and identities beyond their own (Richards, 2018; Yuli, 2024). Within this context, the notion of authenticity has emerged as a central theme, shaping both academic debates and visitor expectations. Since MacCannell (1973) foundational work on staged authenticity, scholars have debated whether authenticity in tourism is an inherent attribute of cultural practices, a socially constructed perception, or a negotiated process between hosts and guests. While early approaches often contrasted "authentic" with "staged," later perspectives emphasize that authenticity is fluid, relational, and context-dependent (Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999). In Indonesia, cultural tourism plays a pivotal role in both economic development and the preservation of local identities. Destinations such as Bali, Lombok, and Yogyakarta are globally renowned for cultural performances, rituals, and heritage attractions. However, the commodification of culture for tourist consumption has raised tensions around ownership, representation, and integrity (Cole, 2007; Dewayani et al., 2023). Communities often face pressure to adapt traditions to align with visitor expectations, which may lead to simplification, dramatization, or even reinvention of cultural expressions (Picard, 1996). At the same time, tourists themselves differ in their perceptions of what constitutes an authentic experience, with some valuing immersion in everyday practices and others preferring curated performances (Aisyah, 2023; Mkono, 2013).

Research on authenticity in Indonesian tourism remains fragmented. Existing studies tend to emphasize either the supply side, focusing on how communities present culture, or the demand side, exploring how tourists interpret authenticity. What is less understood is how authenticity emerges through host–guest interaction, where meaning is co-created and negotiated in situ. This perspective aligns with performative and existential approaches to authenticity, which view it not as a fixed quality but as a lived experience shaped through social encounters (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999).

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how Indonesian hosts and tourists perceive and negotiate cultural authenticity in tourism experiences. Focusing on Bali and Lombok as key cultural destinations, the research employs qualitative methods to capture the voices of both community members and visitors. By analyzing the relational dynamics of authenticity, this study contributes to broader debates on cultural tourism,

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provides insights into sustainable heritage management, and highlights the tensions and possibilities of balancing community identity with visitor expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity has been a foundational concept in tourism studies since MacCannell (1973) seminal work on staged authenticity, which argued that tourists seek authentic experiences but often encounter contrived cultural performances. Subsequent scholarship has challenged this essentialist view, suggesting that authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a socially constructed and negotiated process (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999). Wang (1999) distinction between objective, constructive, and existential authenticity has been particularly influential, highlighting that authenticity may be found in personal feelings of connection rather than in the "realness" of cultural objects or performances.

In cultural tourism, authenticity is often performed strategically by host communities. Picard (1996) study of Bali demonstrated how rituals and performances were adapted to suit tourist expectations, producing a form of "touristic culture" that reconfigures tradition within market logics. Similarly, Cole (2007) showed how cultural commodification in Flores, Indonesia, generated both opportunities for empowerment and tensions over representation. These dynamics suggest that authenticity operates within a continuum between preservation and adaptation, shaped by power relations and economic imperatives.

From the demand side, tourists' perceptions of authenticity vary widely. Some visitors prioritize immersion in everyday practices and interactions with local people, while others value staged performances that confirm preconceived images of culture (Mkono, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). The interactional approach thus becomes crucial: authenticity is neither entirely produced by hosts nor wholly imagined by guests, but co-created through encounters, dialogue, and performance (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Hardi et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, research on authenticity remains fragmented, often privileging either community narratives or tourist perspectives. Studies of Bali and Lombok highlight both the commodification of rituals and the persistence of cultural pride (Hitchcock & Putra, 2007; Picard, 1996). However, relatively little work has examined the relational dynamics of authenticity as they unfold in host–guest interactions. By situating authenticity within these encounters, the present study seeks to bridge this gap, emphasizing authenticity as a dynamic and contested process that reflects both community identity and visitor interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design to explore how authenticity in cultural tourism is perceived and negotiated between hosts and guests in Indonesian destinations. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for rich exploration of meanings and lived experiences, focusing on how authenticity is co-created through interaction rather than measured as a static attribute. Fieldwork was conducted in Bali and Lombok, two destinations renowned for their cultural tourism and long histories of both domestic and international visitation. These locations were selected purposively as they represent contexts where cultural traditions, rituals, and performances are deeply embedded in community identity while simultaneously exposed to processes of commodification for tourism markets.

Participants were drawn from both host and guest groups. On the host side, interviews were carried out with local artisans, cultural performers, tour guides, homestay owners, and community leaders involved in organizing festivals and heritage events. On the guest side, interviews were conducted with domestic tourists from Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta, as well as international visitors from Europe and Australia. In total, thirty-five participants contributed to the study, comprising twenty hosts and fifteen guests. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure diversity of perspectives, while snowball referrals were used to access participants embedded in community networks.

Data collection took place over a four-month period in 2024. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method, with conversations lasting between forty-five minutes and ninety minutes. Host participants were asked to reflect on how they present cultural traditions to tourists, how they balance cultural integrity with market demands, and how they perceive visitor expectations. Guests were asked about their perceptions of authentic cultural experiences, their motivations for visiting heritage sites, and their responses to staged versus everyday encounters. All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, either Bahasa Indonesia or English, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation complemented the interviews, as the researcher attended cultural performances, religious ceremonies, and heritage festivals, maintaining detailed field notes on how authenticity was staged, interpreted, and negotiated in real time. Supplementary materials, such as brochures, promotional videos, and social media posts, were also collected to triangulate the data.

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, following the six-step approach outlined by (Aminullah, 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was conducted inductively, identifying recurring patterns in how authenticity was discussed by both hosts and guests. Codes were then refined into themes that captured the relational dynamics of authenticity, including strategic performance, tourist expectations, and tensions around commodification. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, field notes, and visual data, enabling systematic comparison across participant groups and sites. Themes were developed iteratively, with attention paid to both convergence and divergence in perspectives.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to confirm that the interpretations reflected their perspectives. Thick description of the research context was provided to enhance transferability. Dependability was maintained through careful documentation of analytic decisions and coding processes, while reflexive journaling was used to acknowledge researcher positionality and potential biases in interpreting cultural practices.

Ethical approval was granted by the university's research ethics committee prior to fieldwork. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting to protect identities. Because the study engaged with cultural practices that are deeply meaningful to communities, particular care was taken to ensure respectful representation and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

RESULTS

Strategic Performances by Hosts

Hosts consistently described their cultural practices as sites of negotiation between cultural pride and commercial pressures. Many participants emphasized that while they sought to preserve the integrity of traditions, the demands of tourism often required simplification, dramatization, or modification of performances. In Bali, temple dances were frequently adapted to fixed schedules and shortened durations for tourist audiences. A dance coordinator explained, "In the village, a dance can last for hours and is part of ritual. For tourists, we cut it to thirty minutes. If we keep the full ritual, no visitor would stay, but if we make it too short, we lose the meaning." This statement reflects the constant tension between maintaining cultural depth and ensuring market viability.

In Lombok, hosts similarly reported strategic adjustments, particularly in weaving and handicraft demonstrations. A weaver commented, "We cannot show the whole process of making cloth because it takes weeks. Instead, we show one part, the most colorful, so that tourists understand quickly." Such practices illustrate how cultural products are selectively packaged, presenting condensed versions of traditions that remain recognizable yet commercially appealing.

While some hosts acknowledged the need to adapt for tourism, they also expressed ambivalence about the potential erosion of authenticity. A community leader remarked, "Tourism is important for our income, but sometimes I feel we are performing more for the camera than for our ancestors." These reflections suggest that strategic performances are not merely pragmatic choices but are also accompanied by emotional negotiations of identity and cultural meaning.

Interestingly, several participants emphasized that adaptation was not always viewed negatively. For some, adjusting traditions was framed as an act of creativity and resilience. A musician in Bali noted, "Tourists bring new energy. We make new versions of old songs. It is still our culture, but we show it in a way they can enjoy." This highlights how performances can simultaneously preserve continuity and allow for innovation, demonstrating the dynamic and evolving character of cultural authenticity.

Overall, the findings show that hosts in both Bali and Lombok engage in deliberate strategies to balance cultural preservation with economic survival. These performances are strategic not only in meeting tourist expectations but also in negotiating internal debates within communities about the meaning and purpose of cultural expression in a globalized tourism economy.

Tourist Perceptions of Authenticity

Tourists expressed diverse understandings of authenticity, reflecting variations in cultural background, prior experiences, and personal motivations for travel. For some visitors, authenticity was equated with immersion in everyday life and encounters beyond the curated stage. A domestic tourist from Yogyakarta explained, "For me, the most authentic moment was not the performance in the temple, but when I ate with the family in their house. That is when I felt the real culture." Similarly, an Australian backpacker in Lombok remarked, "The small interactions, like learning how to weave or joining a cooking session, felt more genuine than the big shows." Such

statements highlight a preference for participatory, spontaneous, and informal encounters over formalized performances.

Other tourists, however, perceived authenticity through staged cultural displays, valuing them as accessible, entertaining, and symbolically rich. A European visitor attending a dance performance in Bali commented, "Even if it is arranged for tourists, it still gives me a sense of tradition. I came here to see the costumes, the music, and the atmosphere, and I was not disappointed." For these visitors, the staging of culture did not diminish authenticity but rather confirmed pre-existing expectations of what Indonesian culture should look like.

Interestingly, differences also emerged between domestic and international tourists. Domestic visitors tended to emphasize shared cultural identity and familiarity, interpreting authenticity through connections to heritage and regional diversity. In contrast, international tourists often framed authenticity as "otherness," seeking experiences that were exotic or different from their daily lives. A visitor from Surabaya noted, "Watching the Sasak weaving made me proud, because it is part of Indonesian culture, even if I am not from Lombok." Meanwhile, a German traveler described, "I wanted something that feels far from Europe, and the performance gave me that feeling." These differences reveal how authenticity is constructed not only by the hosts' performances but also by the visitors' own cultural frameworks.

At times, tourists also acknowledged the blurred line between authentic and staged experiences. A Canadian visitor reflected, "I know the dances are shorter and designed for us, but that doesn't bother me. Authenticity is how I feel in the moment, not whether it is the same as in the village ritual." Such perspectives echo existential and performative approaches to authenticity, where meaning is derived from personal engagement rather than objective cultural accuracy.

Overall, tourists' perceptions of authenticity were highly variable, ranging from the pursuit of immersion in everyday practices to the appreciation of curated performances. This diversity underscores that authenticity is not a singular quality but a subjective and relational experience, shaped by expectations, cultural positioning, and the specific nature of host–guest encounters.

Tensions and Conflicts in Host–Guest Encounters

While both hosts and tourists engaged in processes of meaning-making around authenticity, their perspectives sometimes diverged in ways that created tension. Hosts frequently expressed unease over the simplification or commodification of cultural practices, whereas tourists occasionally voiced disappointment when experiences did not meet their expectations. These tensions illustrate authenticity as a contested terrain shaped by unequal power relations, economic necessity, and differing cultural logics.

Several hosts noted feelings of cultural dilution when traditions were modified for tourist consumption. A community elder in Lombok remarked, "We shorten the ceremonies for visitors, but in our heart it feels incomplete. It is like showing only half of who we are." Such sentiments reveal the emotional cost of commodification, where cultural expressions risk being perceived by practitioners as fragmented or detached from their original meanings. For some, this was compounded by fears of younger generations prioritizing tourist versions of rituals over traditional forms.

From the tourist perspective, conflicts arose when staged performances failed to align with expectations of "authentic" culture. An international visitor in Bali commented, "I thought the dance would be a religious ceremony, but it felt more like a show. I left unsure if I had seen the real thing." These instances of disappointment underscore the gap between imagined authenticity and the practical realities of staged tourism encounters. Domestic tourists, in contrast, sometimes questioned why performances were overly dramatized for foreigners, with one visitor from Jakarta stating, "It was beautiful, but it did not feel like what my grandmother told me about Balinese culture."

Misunderstandings also emerged when tourists attempted to engage more deeply with local traditions but encountered resistance from hosts who sought to maintain cultural boundaries. A Lombok artisan recounted, "Some tourists wanted to take photos during prayers, but that is not allowed. They think everything is for them, but some things are sacred." Such situations reveal the limits of access and the friction between cultural preservation and tourist curiosity.

These tensions highlight the asymmetrical nature of host–guest relations, where economic pressures often compel communities to adapt, even when such adaptations conflict with internal cultural values. At the same time, tourists' search for authenticity, whether in ritual depth or exotic spectacle, can generate unmet expectations or cultural misunderstandings. Authenticity thus emerges not as a harmonious outcome but as an ongoing negotiation marked by friction, compromise, and contestation.

Co-creation of Authenticity

Despite the tensions and conflicts noted earlier, many encounters between hosts and guests also revealed instances of co-creation, where authenticity was not predetermined by either side but emerged through shared experience. In these moments, authenticity was understood less as an objective property of cultural practices and more as a relational construct shaped through dialogue, improvisation, and mutual engagement.

Hosts often described how tourists' curiosity and participation transformed routine activities into meaningful exchanges. A weaver in Lombok explained, "When visitors sit beside me and try the loom, they laugh, they make mistakes, and we laugh together. That moment feels authentic, because it is not a show, it is us sharing life." Here, authenticity was not tied to the accuracy of the weaving demonstration but to the interactive process that generated connection and joy.

Tourists likewise highlighted experiences where their involvement created a sense of authenticity. An international visitor in Bali recounted, "Joining the family to cook in their kitchen, I felt part of their daily life. It was simple, but it felt more real than watching a performance from the front row." Such reflections point to existential authenticity, where personal engagement produces feelings of connection that transcend concerns over whether practices are staged or traditional (Wang, 1999).

Performances themselves sometimes became collaborative spaces where authenticity was co-produced. A Balinese musician described how audiences influenced the energy of a performance: "When tourists clap, sing along, or ask questions, it changes how we play. In that moment, the music belongs to both us and them." This illustrates how cultural events are not one-directional displays but interactive negotiations that take shape in the encounter.

Co-creation also occurred when tourists' expectations and hosts' intentions aligned, generating shared meanings that satisfied both sides. A domestic tourist from Jakarta reflected, "I knew the dance was arranged for visitors, but the passion of the dancers moved me. It felt authentic because they were proud to show their culture, and I was proud to see it." Such examples reveal how authenticity can be both staged and sincere, simultaneously catering to tourist expectations and affirming cultural identity.

These findings suggest that authenticity in Indonesian cultural tourism is not exclusively defined by hosts or tourists, nor is it determined by the "realness" of the practice itself. Instead, authenticity is relational, produced through the interaction of both sides, and shaped by the emotions, intentions, and contexts that frame the encounter. In this sense, authenticity is best understood as a co-created process, dynamic and fluid rather than static and predetermined.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide new insights into how authenticity in cultural tourism is constructed and negotiated in Indonesian destinations, particularly through host–guest interactions. The results demonstrate that authenticity is neither an objective essence nor a purely subjective perception but a dynamic and relational process, echoing the arguments (Afifah et al., 2025; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999).

The first theme, strategic performances by hosts, underscores the delicate balance between cultural preservation and market demands. Hosts' decisions to shorten ceremonies, dramatize rituals, or condense artisanal practices reflect what MacCannell (1973) originally described as staged authenticity. However, rather than being merely inauthentic, these strategic adaptations can be interpreted as expressions of agency and resilience, as suggested by Picard (1996) work on analysis of Flores. This study confirms that staging does not simply erode authenticity but may also represent a creative reconfiguration of tradition in response to global markets.

The second theme, tourist perceptions of authenticity, highlights the diversity of visitor expectations. Some tourists sought immersion in everyday practices, resonating with existential authenticity Wang (1999), while others embraced staged performances as fulfilling symbolic and aesthetic desires. Differences between domestic and international tourists were particularly notable, with the former framing authenticity as cultural pride and continuity, and the latter often constructing authenticity as exotic otherness. These findings align with Mkono, (2013) observation that authenticity is mediated by cultural frameworks and personal motivations.

The third theme, tensions and conflicts, illustrates how authenticity becomes a site of negotiation and contestation. Hosts' concerns about cultural dilution and tourists' occasional disappointment at staged experiences reflect the asymmetrical nature of tourism encounters, where economic necessity often outweighs cultural integrity. This confirms Rickly-Boyd (2012) argument that authenticity is inseparable from power relations, as well as Hampton & Jeyacheya (2020) findings that small island communities face structural pressures to commodify culture. Importantly, these tensions highlight the emotional labor involved in performing authenticity, with hosts negotiating pride, compromise, and frustration simultaneously.

The fourth theme, co-creation of authenticity, offers a more hopeful perspective. Instances where tourists participated in weaving, cooking, or music-making illustrate that authenticity can be collaboratively constructed through dialogue and shared experience. These findings support performative approaches to authenticity Cohen & Cohen (2012) that emphasize interaction, improvisation, and affect. By showing that authenticity emerges in the encounter itself rather than in predetermined cultural content, this study contributes to the growing body of research that positions authenticity as relational, processual, and co-created.

Taken together, these findings suggest that authenticity in Indonesian cultural tourism cannot be reduced to either staged performances or tourists' expectations alone. Instead, authenticity is best understood as a dynamic interplay of cultural strategies, visitor interpretations, and the relational spaces in which hosts and guests meet. Theoretically, the study advances the understanding of authenticity as a co-created and contested phenomenon. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of policies and practices that respect host communities' agency, support cultural integrity, and encourage tourist education toward more responsible engagement with local traditions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how cultural authenticity is constructed and negotiated in Indonesian tourism through host–guest interactions. The findings demonstrate that authenticity is neither a fixed property of cultural traditions nor a purely individual perception, but a relational process that emerges in the encounter between hosts and visitors. Hosts engaged in strategic performances to balance cultural pride with commercial necessity, tourists expressed diverse expectations ranging from immersion in everyday life to appreciation of staged performances, and tensions arose when practices were perceived as diluted or misrepresented. Yet, moments of co-creation also emerged, where shared experiences in weaving, cooking, or music-making generated authenticity that was felt and recognized by both sides.

The study is limited by its focus on two destinations, Bali and Lombok, which may not capture the full range of cultural tourism contexts across Indonesia. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative methods provides depth of understanding but restricts the generalizability of the findings.

Recommendations include the need for tourism policies that empower host communities to define how their culture is presented, while also educating tourists about the diversity and evolving nature of authenticity. Future research could expand to other regions and employ comparative or mixed-method approaches to enrich understanding of authenticity as a negotiated and co-created phenomenon.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have nothing to disclose.

Data Availability

The data is available upon reasonable request.

Author Contribution

The authors of this study contributed equally.

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