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Performance and Visitors' Perception of Authenticity in Eco-cultural Tourism

With the increasing commodification of cultural heritage induced by tourism development, the perception of a 'real' travel experience often depends on what is defined as authentic, original and local. Visitors are becoming increasingly concerned about the authenticity of eco-cultural tourism practices when they visit culturally and environmentally remote regions. The purpose of this study is to examine the role performance plays in visitors' perception of authenticity of eco-cultural tourism experiences. Various theoretical foundations and aspects of visitors' perceptions of authenticity in cultural heritage tourism are considered. A grounded theory approach based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with several categories of visitors including 25 clients from two eco-tours in South and Central Kazakhstan and 29 Free Independent Travellers (FITs) was adopted to identify visitors' perception of authenticity of various aspects of their tourism experiences and the attributes of the visitors' performative aspects of their travels. Results reveal that the performative aspects contributing to the perceived authenticity of the visitors' eco-cultural experiences are spontaneous, existential and reciprocal relationships with their hosts in intimate tourism encounters. The findings contribute to literature regarding authenticity and cultural heritage tourism by exploring new directions in which to apply the concept of authenticity in eco-cultural tourism experiences and by theorising the link between performance-based touristic space and the perception of authenticity. This space becomes a basis for interaction and social exchange within the host–guest relationship.

Keywords: Authenticity, Perception, Visitor Experience, Performance, Host-Guest Relationship, Eco-cultural Tourism, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

An important aspect of the tourism experience for visitors when they visit culturally and environmentally remote regions is the perceived authenticity of what they see. Authenticity is constructed in multifaceted ways according to the various tourism stakeholders involved in the politics of commodification as well as the tourist consuming the image (Silver, 1993). From the visitors' perspective, authenticity is seen as an element for satisfying their desire to experience the genuine, the timeless and the unchanged in remote regions of the world. What tourists usually see is the performative aspect of local cultures – a 'performed authenticity' created, staged and carried out for external consumption (MacCannell, 1976).

Despite the number of studies researching perceptions of authenticity in cultural heritage tourism (Cohen, 1988, 1989; Conran, 2006; Jamal & Hill, 2004; Xie, 2011; Yang & Wall, 2009; Zhu, 2012), there is no common agreement about how to interpret the various meanings of authenticity given by tourists visiting 'off the beaten track' destinations. With the increasing commodification of cultural heritage and the demand of various types of ethnic tourism, community-based tourism, cultural and ecological tourism in an array of destinations, an important aspect is the performance of both the host and the guest in tourism encounters. The demand for cultural heritage experiences has led to the emergence of a number of new nature and cultural-tourism products, a form of tourism where ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create experiences for tourists (Wallace & Russell, 2004). In Kazakhstan, steppes landscapes have a strong significance for the former nomadic populations who inhabit them and tour operators combine ecological and cultural aspects of the natural environment with local populations' lives. Such forms of tourism differ from mass tourism in terms of profit levels and control of the enterprise (Wallace, 2002), but also "acts as a model for how cultural and eco-tourism could be employed by local people to build an empowered, sustainable future in similar settings" (Wallace & Russell, 2004, p. 236).

As destinations market the dynamic nature of their cultural heritage and the potential for eco-cultural activities, it becomes important to understand tourists' perceptions and experience of cultural artefacts in the construction of tourism activities and practices. There is a need to determine more specifically how visitors' perceptions of authenticity operate in the host–guest relationship and, as Wang (1999) details, the extent

to which the notion of authenticity provides a basis for interaction and social exchange. The purpose of this study is to examine the role performance plays in visitors' perception of authenticity in cultural heritage toruism. Specifically, the article examines visitors' perception of authenticity of various aspects of their tourism experiences in Kazakhstan and relays the attributes of the visitors' performative aspects of their travels within the host guest relationship.

Literature review

Visitors' Perceptions of Authenticity in Cultural Heritage

MacCannell's work (1976, 2001) reveals the complexity of the term authenticity and its multiple uses. Tourist settings can be viewed as a continuum, with the foremost region being the one that is for show and the backmost region the one that is considered more authentic and motivates touristic consciousness providing a "chance to glimpse the real". The 'backstage' region, where hosts' genuine cultural heritage is maintained and cultural integrity and identity is kept, is the intimate and authentic part of the tourism destination that is sought by some visitors. The concept of authenticity in tourism is inevitably associated with the kind of tourists who are visiting a site. For Xie (2004), tourists' perception of authenticity, while highly personal, can still be influenced, segmented and analysed. McKercher and Du Cros (2002, 2003) have classified tourists into various heterogeneous segments depending on how important authenticity is to them when visiting cultural attractions. For some tourists, authenticity can play a central role while for others it is secondary – these tourists want authenticity but not necessarily reality.

Scholars have defined three types of authenticity in cultural heritage tourism. Jamal and Hill (2002, p. 84) argue that "an authentic historic event or site is one that has been scientifically and objectively situated in the original time period, setting, materials, etc., of that era." For N. Wang (1999), the objective approach of authenticity highlights that the visitor's authentic experience depends upon the tourist recognising the authenticity of the visited objects or experience. Importance is placed on objects made from what are considered to be authentic materials and by craftspeople or on events and rituals that are perceived as being traditional emanations of cultures.

Some argue that a destination's sense of place is one that can be constructed. The constructive authenticity of an experience is relative and negotiable (Cohen, 1988) and context dependent (Salamone, 1997). As a consequence, it is argued that

authenticity can also be viewed as a 'social construct' (Hughes, 1995). What is considered an authentic tourism experience is not static, it evolves over time and is influenced by sociological and cultural factors. According to Wang (1999, p. 355) "authenticity is thus a projection of tourists' own beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotyped images and consciousness onto toured objects, particularly toured Others." From this perspective, authenticity is linked to an experience of the individual. Visitors' positive or negative attitudes to the host population depends on their previous travel experiences (Hall, 2007; Pearce, 1982), which either confirm or challenge their pre-existing thoughts and perceptions about a tourism destination.

A more existential approach to authenticity is argued by some scholars (Hughes, 1995; Wang, 1999), that takes into account expectations of visitors in terms of lived experience. Cohen (1979, 1985, 1989) categorises the existential tourist as the 'one who spiritually abandons modernity, moves furthest away from the beaten track and tries to get as close as possible to the Other'. Knudsen and Waade (2010) argue that the personal investment and emotions of the tourist in the quest for authenticity are becoming more important than object-related authenticity, therefore the existential personal quests of the tourist are of central interest.

Performance and Perception in Authenticity

According to Goffman (1967), performance is found everywhere in what he describes as 'interactional ritual'. Transposed to the context of tourism and hospitality, "performance refers to the expected display of behaviour by host and guest: the perception, considerateness, deference, and demeanour that accompany the social interaction" (Heuman, 2005, p. 411). Knudsen and Waade (2010, p. 2) emphasise the importance of understanding performance in the perception of authenticity of the the travel experience:

> Whether one is a performing body or city/region/country, it is possible to authenticate sites, sights, places and to enhance the tourists'/travellers' understanding and their sense of intimacy, self-reflection and feelings toward their surroundings.

Tourists not only gaze but they also perform at specific sights. By including actions and emotions in performance-based touristic spaces, visitors can authenticate places through their emotional connection to them. It is proposed that tourists can achieve an authentic experience through relationships with people within tourism settings. Aronsson (1994, p. 86), for example, refers to 'authentic meeting places' where visitors and local

populations meet in encounters that are part of the everyday life of the local populations. Within the tourism encounter, the host–guest relationship is thus complex and context dependent. The concept of authenticity is therefore the nature of that relationship as well as the products presented. The idea of performance between hosts and guests implies a relationship between one another, and the interaction between hosts and guests has many different scenarios of authenticity.

Edensor (2000, p. 324) argues that "performances vary enormously and depend upon the regulation of the stage and the players" (for example, contrived or intimate tourism encounters), and "the relationship between the players" (for example the level of reciprocal relationship between hosts and guests). The experience of place, despite being largely socially constructed (Cohen, 1984, 1988) can thus depend on several factors, including intimacy and reciprocity. The challenge within the 'tourist-Other' relationship is often a lack of intimacy required to fully appreciate the complexity of cultural heritage (Xie, 2011). Conran (2011, p. 1455) highlights the importance of intimacy as a way to share tourism experiences, as "intimacy is an embodied experience that arouses a sense of closeness and a story about a shared experience."

In the field of tourism, reciprocity includes cooperation at the inter-personal level (host–guest). Wearing, Lyons and Snead (2010) argue that reciprocal relationships between host communities and volunteer tourists develop out of productive exchanges that enhance local communities' understanding of tourists' expectations. The potential of the host–guest relationship not only allows the opportunity for mutual knowledge between both parties but can also enhance understanding and acceptance through interaction, (Tucker, 2003). The performative home-stay tourism encounter allows the opportunity for both visitors and home-stay providers to refine their understandings of their respective cultural differences and traditions.

Methodology

Taking into account the exploratory nature of the study and the limited amount of existing academic literature regarding authenticity in Kazakhstan, grounded theory, was considered an appropriate methodology to adopt for this study. The intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to discover an abstract analytical schema of a process or action or interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For Kolar and Zabkar (2010, p. 654) authenticity is a socially, individually constructed and evaluated

perception or experience and "is a matter of extent and hence its extent can be evaluated." In accordance with the constructivist position applied in various tourism studies (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Cohen, 1988) this research is predominantly situated in constructivist/interpretivist thought and practice. Constructivism assumes contemporous multiple social realities rather than there being the one and only 'real reality'. Following the constructivist grounded theory, the data for this study was constructed through an ongoing interaction between researcher and participant (Hallberg, 2006).

Study site

Kazakhstan encompasses numerous tourism attractions based on its ancient nomadic civilisations, past Soviet times, and a diverse array of cultural and natural landscapes. The changing material culture of Kazakhstan since its independence in 1991 has transformed elements of the traditional nomadic culture into new lifestyles and traditions. The modernisation of Kazakhstani lifestyles and international tourism development has led to an increase in the number of visitor arrivals, with visitors primarily looking for the Silk Road, adventure and extreme tours (Werner, 2003). The Travel and Tourism Competitive Index 2013 issued by the World Economic Forum (2013) ranked Kazakhstan in 88th position out of 139 and evaluated the number of international tourist arrivals in the country in 2011 at 40,930 visitors. The development of the business and ecotourism sectors in the country is attracting visitors predominantly coming from the Community of Independent States (CIS), China, Germany and Turkey (Euromonitor, 2013). Since 1998, ecotourism projects and community-based eco-tours have been developed and promoted by national and international organisations.

After one of the researchers met with various stakeholders (policymakers, tourism developers) involved in eco-cultural tourism in the country during the first international ecotourism conference held in Karaganda city in August 2010, the 'Kyzylarai' and then the 'Tulip' tours were chosen as sources of empirical evidence for the study. The 'Kyzylarai' tour was developed by the members of the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project and was one of the first community-based eco-tours in Central Kazakhstan. The three day 'Kyzylarai' tour, departing from the city of Karaganda, combines visits to steppes landscapes and archaeological sites from the Bronze Age (the granite sepulchres of Begazy), accommodation in the local inhabitants' guest houses of the Shabanbai Bi

village located 300 kilometres south west of Karaganda city where the local population produce handmade fur products and numerous fermented-milk products (such as horse milk or *kymiz*). The three day 'Tulip' tour in South Kazakhstan, departing from the city of Almaty, includes a visit to the petroglyphs from the Bronze Age of the UNESCO World Heritage site of Tamgaly, exploration in the steppes landscapes and a visit to a camel farm where visitors are offered the opportunity to taste *shubat* (camel milk) and derived camel milk products. Visitors stay in the Kanshengel yurt-camp located 80 kilometres south west of Almaty city which is specifically organised for them. In order to keep a certain level of comfort, home-stay providers offered visitors the choice of sleeping in beds or on *körpe*s (traditional mattresses on the floor), as well as proper sanitary conditions and toilets. Small yurt souvenirs are offered to 'Tulip' tourists at the end of their two day experience in the Kazakhstani steppes. Both tours represent key eco-cultural tourism practices in the country in terms of activities for visitors but involved different tourism stakeholders, offering contrasting situations regarding the research setting and the organisational structure of the tours.

Sample design, data collection and analysis

Due to the recent development of the 'Kyzylarai' and 'Tulip' tours, there was limited information regarding the sample of respondents therefore a purposive or judgmental sampling method was used in order to select respondents that would be especially informative about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Kazakhstan. This sampling method is preferred in situations when an expert uses judgment in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2009). After a phase of data collection in Central Kazakhstan with the 'Kyzylarai' tour in August 2011, one of the researchers embarked on the 'Tulip' tour in South Kazakhstan in May 2012. Looking at two different tours involving different informants in various geographical locations allowed theoretical saturation to be maximised. Twenty five semi-structured interviews were undertaken with international visitors on the 'Kyzylarai' and 'Tulip' tours during the peak of the tourism season, in August 2011 and May 2012, respectively. All international visitors were between the ages of 30 and 60 and had not participated in a Kazakhstani eco-cultural tour before.

As part of informant triangulation and sampling strategy, twenty nine semi-structured interviews were then undertaken with Free and Independent Travellers (FITs) between August 2011 and September 2012. These FITs were either met by one of the researchers

during their travels in Kazakhstan or identified during various discussions regarding tourism development in the country. Two thirds of these FITs were students in Kazakhstan between the ages of 20 and 30 and the remaining were expatriates and international travellers between the ages of 30 and 50. The interviews focused on the visitors' perceptions of authenticity during their eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan. Questions used in the semi-structured interviews aimed to glean rich and complex answers from the participants relating to their perceptions of authenticity and their previous knowledge of Kazakhstani history and culture.

Analysis of empirical material in this study followed Charmaz's (2005) constructivist approach of grounded theory: the analysis of the interviews is related to time, culture and context, and reflects both the participants' and the researcher's ways of thinking. Theory in this way is created or constructed in an interactional process between researcher and data, "indicating epistemological subjectivism and the inclusion of existing theories into the analysis" (Hallberg, 2006, p. 147). Notes were taken throughout the one hour long interviews and reviewed to draw out key themes. In line with Marshall and Rossman's (2006) process of organising data and identifying any emergent patterns and themes, the researchers firstly analysed any recurrent events or comments and attached a theme to them and then followed this analysis by validating relationships and refining these themes in the third stage. As grounded theory draws upon all information to generate theoretical links between themes, the researchers used the terms 'several', 'some' or the 'majority' where appropriate in the subsequent sections to indicate a sense of consensus.

Findings

Analysis of the data reveal that the performative aspects contributing to the perceived authenticity of the visitors' eco-cultural experiences can be divided into three types of relationship between host and guest. These relationships are spontaneous, existential and reciprocal in intimate tourism encounters.

Spontaneous relationships

Different visitors pointed out various levels of involvement with the local populations depending on the nature of their tourism experience. For a participant on the 'Kyzylarai'

tour, it is possible to have a feeling of authenticity for the place on the condition that the local populations do not change their behaviour for the tourist:

> "The ideal authentic tourism experience could be encountered as if the family was living the same way independently from me, as if I was not there. What they organise for visitors should remain a piece of their lives, not something they are not doing anymore."

Similarly, a visitor on the 'Tulip' tour believed that it is important that their visit has minimum impact on the daily lives of the locals. The authenticity of her experience came primarily from how the local community treated her *like any other ordinary person.*

> "Tourists should not interfere or interfere a minimum with the local populations, and should be going on sites where local people live rather than having indigenous population coming to stage cultural performances."

A majority of the visitors on the 'Tulip' tour pointed out that altering aspects of the tour to accommodate Western tastes (beds instead of traditional mattresses (*körpes*) on the floor, and Western meals) all contributed to a perception of staged authenticity and their tourism experiences were considered to lack spontaneity. Another tourist of the 'Tulip' tour who visited the Kanshengel village said that the absence of tourism activities and the 'spontaneity of the occasion' increased her perception of authenticity:

> "Authentic means having more traditional meals and a tourism experience that is not staged. It's about letting things happen in a natural way; for example, going at a particular time to a village where traditional feasts and celebrations are organised."

Most 'Kyzylarai' clients highlighted that their tourism experience was associated with spontaneous moments and the importance of 'unstaged' tour events to maintaining a high level of authenticity, as one of them details:

> "They invited us for a lunch, and the whole family was sitting and eating with us as they usually do, then he was playing *dombra* (traditional Kazakh guitar) and they were asking us about our country. It was not organised in advance, and that is why it was special."

Similarly, the majority of FITs cycling in the Kazakh steppes pointed out the strong connection between an authentic tourism experience and spontaneous interactions they experienced with local populations, as one highlighted:

> "An authentic tourism experience is a rare and unique experience that favours spontaneity. It's about living in the present time. It's also an entire shared experience with the local populations."

For visitors of both tours, eco-cultural tourism is described as the "the ideal way to discover the local people's lifestyles", suggesting that spontaneity (Cary, 2004) is of paramount importance in experiencing authentic moments with the local populations and enabling genuine tourism experiences and exchanges. These tourists highlighted the spontaneity of the local populations with whom they mingled and the proximity to their hosts directly augmented their perceptions of the authenticity of their tourism experiences.

Existential relationships

An FIT pointed out the link between an authentic tourism experience and the pleasure derived from the experience itself. For her, an authentic tourism experience is synonymous to a "joyful experience for your body, for your mind". One of the 'Tulip' tourist detailed her impressions when she arrived at Kanshengel yurt-camp: "The little oven, the organisation of the camp, the people, the separate kitchen in the yurt, it met my expectations. That's how I imagined it." A 'Tulip' tour client, while visiting a camel farm during the second day of the tour, mentioned: "Local populations' lifestyles in rural areas inspired me a lot. People struggle with the environment every day; however they won't change their ways of living." A majority of the 'Kyzylarai' visitors considered the time spent with the Kazakhstani family in the Shabanbai Bi village was authentic, as one commented:

> "What was authentic were the 'little moments' during the visit such as living together with other families in a small village as a community where everyone knows each other, where in the summer people dine outside and drink *kymiz* (horse fermented milk) from their own cows and camels. When people sleep outdoors during spring and summer, and sing songs with a *dombra* (a two strings traditional guitar) to entertain the family and guests."

Some 'Tulip' tour visitors had reservations about the authenticity of the yurts, focusing instead on the importance of mingling with the local population to obtain a feeling of authenticity: "Sleeping in tourists' yurts was not authentic to me, but sleeping in the same yurts with the local community would be more authentic." Contrived tourism attractions such as tourists' yurts were accepted by a few visitors who were looking for more comfort. One visitor highlighted the necessity to adapt to the travel conditions to the type of visitor and the visitors' requirements:

> "The ideal thing would be to mix with the people, not living apart. In particular, living in a yurt with local people is the 'ultimate' experience you can have. But there should be some levels of customisation depending on the visitors' requirements as well."

Most FITs think nomadic food (*bes barmak*, traditional dish made out of horse meat, and *Kymiz* or horse milk) is objectively authentic. In particular they insisted on the importance of the hosts teaching their guests how to cook the nomadic food dishes to enhance the notion of authenticity associated with the national food. While half of the 'Kyzylarai' participants mentioned that sharing the meals with the local population "as they would do it for themselves" is authentic, a majority of the 'Tulip' tourists characterised the Europeanised food as somewhat artificial and inauthentic. Visitors on both the 'Tulip' and 'Kyzylarai' tours suggested that the participatory activities between hosts and guests in the guest houses was an important element in their tourism experiences. Visitors engage with 'local' food and beverages on holiday as a way of obtaining a more meaningful sense of connection between themselves, the people and places that produce the food. The experience is seen as way to test oneself in unfamiliar environments and discover a part of the 'self' within the host–guest tourism encounter. A 'Tulip' tour member explained that the most important parts of her travel experience in the steppes were *the moments* when she was taking full responsibility for herself and mingling with the local populations:

> "The most authentic experience depends on the tourists themselves. For me, for example, it's going somewhere where I cannot speak the language and communicate with local people, it's about the little moments in the shops or at the local hairdresser. It is something I explore myself."

The idea of self-discovery was also pointed out by some FITs, for whom an authentic tourism experience is to "see who you are in another culture with native people, like something full of truth" and one "when tourists get a chance to live the life of an average citizen of the hosting country and experience all traditions". Sharing feelings with the local population intensifies the tourism experience between hosts and guests, and it also increases the chances of adding to the visitors' knowledge about the tourism destination.

Reciprocal relationships

Hall (2007, p. 1139) claims "it is important to consider the role of experience for its capacity to provide shared meanings through shared experiences." Clients from both the 'Kyzylarai' and the 'Tulip' tours feel it is important that tour organisers realise that visitors want to experience the 'voices of the locals' when in the villages, as one 'Kyzylarai' tourist details:

> "Organisers are not aware that we are really interested to discover more about the home-stay providers' lives. It will be more interesting for me to know their feelings, their points of views; The tour operator should make them aware that they are not only serving us but

they can interact with us, that visitors feel glad when they can exchange their views, talk to local people about their lives and cultures."

Another visitor of the 'Kyzylarai' tour believed the local people are as interested in them as they are with the home-stay providers:

"The reason why I loved Kazakhstan after my first visit was the communication with people: they liked to invite us, they were curious about us."

The reciprocal relationship depends on the involvement of both hosts and guests. FITs emphasised the importance of travelling in the country and interacting with local people without 'forcing' the relationship, as one of them detailed:

"There is a great interaction and help between different people in the steppes. There is still a 'survival' feeling that makes people interact with each other. People take the time to exchange with local populations, and the host population will also take the time to ask questions, get interested in the visitors and sharing a 'one to one' relationship. The result of the exchange is depending on the implication of both parts, and the tourism experience is the result of these implications"

Authenticity is thus about seeing how people live and having the opportunity to take part in their life and exchange points of views with them. Respondents pointed out the local people's "willingness to make contact", that "they like to communicate" and that "they are exceptionally friendly people" and "they were curious about us". The richness of the tourism experience in remote Kazakhstani villages is linked to the understanding visitors receive from the place. One visitor on the 'Tulip' tour mentioned:

"Authentic means genuine to me, which means if things make sense for the local population and for the tourists at the same time. It means finding an ideal compromise in discussions."

A 'Kyzylarai' visitor explained, "Authenticity is about seeing how people live and having the possibility to take part in their life and exchange points of views with them." Three clients of the 'Tulip' tour saw the exchange of information with the local population as being an essential part of the authenticity of their experiences, despite the energy it incurred:

"Living with a family is a perfect way of learning about the culture and the people, to learn their habits, their family structure. We talked about life in the villages, about politics. I like to learn this kind of information from the people themselves directly. The families who are welcoming visitors are interested in you and they like to talk and communicate."

Some FITs suggested that visitors can gain trust and access higher levels of cultural heritage understanding while visiting the country by participating in the activities of the village. They emphasised that the more effort put in by the tourists the more host people

are inclined to share aspects of their lives especially craft-making or the cooking of national dishes. The prospect of sharing an 'experience of living with the local population', becoming accustomed with them and building a relationship around participatory activities was perceived as authentic by visitors who value these experiences in understanding traditional nomadic culture.

Discussion and conclusions

Using a grounded theory methodology, this paper has investigated the performative aspects contributing to the perceived authenticity of the visitors' eco-cultural experiences. The findings contribute to the tourism literature in two ways. First, the research explored new directions in which to apply the concept of authenticity in eco-cultural tourism by theorising the link between performance-based touristic space and the perception of authenticity as a basis for interaction and social exchange within the host–guest relationship. In particular, the study reveals that the performative aspects contributing to the visitors' perception of the authenticity of their eco-cultural experiences are spontaneous relationships, existential relationships and reciprocal relationships with their hosts in intimate tourism encounters.

In Kazakhstan, host community members are presenting their daily lives and the nomadic *sense of hospitality* without artificially creating a highly contrived tourism encounter for their guests. An intimate tourism encounter with the local community is thus perceived as a way to get 'genuine' information that augments tourists' perceptions of authenticity about the place they are visiting. Conversely, the absence of intimate tourism encounters with the host populations is referred to by 'Tulip' visitors as being a contributing factor for the perceived lack of authenticity in their tourism experience. This cultural exchange in the guesthouses is based on the idea that both hosts and guests build a relationship by sharing their backgrounds and personal stories in intimate tourism encounters (Conran, 2006; Wang, 1999).

Visitors highlight the spontaneity of the hosts–guests relationships when talking about their understanding of cultural heritage. For a majority of the visitors interviewed, the most authentic tourism experiences are to be found by having spontaneous relationships with their hosts when being accommodated with families. The sense of togetherness experienced in the villages when visitors shared a traditional meal with the home-stay providers are elements that augment the visitors' perception of authenticity

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of their tourism experiences. In contrast, when visitors are accommodated separately from their hosts (such as in the 'Tulip' tour), the host-guest relationship is minimal. The customisation levels of the tourism experience proposed by both tour operators influence the spontaneity of the host–guest relationship. In the case of the 'Kyzylarai' tour, visitors' desired authenticity is met with minor compromises from the hosts' sides.

This study emphasises that visitors' existential moments within the host–guest relationship constitute an important dimension in their perception of authenticity of their tourism experience. Ooi (2002) argues that tourists involved in active participation rather than observation are more likely to experience a sense of existential authenticity. By engaging visitors in participatory activities (cooking and craft-making activities while on site), local operators are aiming to change the nature of the exchange between hosts and guests, reinforcing Hall's (2007, p. 1140) argument that "authenticity lies in the connections, not in separation and distance". This means home-stay providers need to organise a tourism experience focused on the processes of how to prepare local meals and traditional craft-making specifically for tourists. From a visitor's perspective, being invited to participate in the hosts communities' activities is seen as a self-transformative experience from both a cognitive (understanding of cultural heritage) and emotional (emotions encountered with the local populations) point of views.

An important implication emerging from this study is the value of a tour model that enables meaningful communication and exchanges between home-stay providers and their guests. For Edensor (2000, p. 327), "the efficacy of the performance relies equally upon the ability of the audience to share the meaning the actor hopes to transmit." This paper has recognised the importance of creating a host–guest relationship through a stronger commitment by the visitors to experience some aspects of the lives of the home-stay providers. A higher level of cross-cultural interaction between hosts and guests encountered with local populations encourages creative reciprocity between visitors and their hosts. The feeling of authenticity experienced during the 'Kyzylarai' tour, and the strong perception of staged authenticity among participants in the 'Tulip' tour, highlight the fact that positive interactions and exchanges between visitors and home-stay providers can lead to a better understanding of both the hosts' and guests' cultural backgrounds. A model of tourism development that incorporates incentives (participatory activities) for home-stay providers to develop reciprocal relationships with their guests with minimal involvement from the tour operator could be an option for operators selling 'authentic' eco-cultural tourism

experiences. In this model, the local communities and the visitors are the main contributors to the construction of authenticity, through their engaged, mutual and exclusive relationship. By fostering local communities' interpretation and communication of their cultural heritage with their hosts, tour operators can direct visitors' attention to cultural values and provide a heritage experience that is specific to the location in which it occurs.

As the Kazakhstani tourism market is maturing and will attract an increasing number of visitors, which implies an increasing commodification of performances (Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Milne, 2015; Tiberghien & Xie, 2016), there is a risk that the main aspect of spontaneous, reciprocal and existential relationships between hosts and guests will disappear in favour of packaged, contrived and planned tourism activities. Staged cultural performances resulting from the commercialisation of tourism activities might change the nature of the host–guest relationship as the host community will adapt to the visitors' demands for cultural products and performances. By managing cultural encounters in a sustainable manner, tourism can be used to reinforce both the native culture's uniqueness and cross-cultural interactions between hosts and guests in a way that reduces stereotypes and favours the establishment of tourism encounters based on a relative genuine cultural heritage.

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