

Branding Heritage through Pseudo-Events: The Case of Melaka, Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines how heritage tourism destinations reconcile the tension between visually appealing spectacles and genuine cultural experiences by analyzing Melaka, Malaysia, a UNESCO World Heritage city. Drawing on qualitative interviews with twenty participants, the research applies the newly developed Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) to interpret the findings. CASM conceptualizes authenticity as a continuum rather than a binary. Findings reveal that Melaka's stakeholders often employ staged "pseudo-events" and digital media to attract visitors. These strategies can prioritize convenience and visual novelty over deep cultural engagement. Tourists' reactions vary, with some deriving satisfaction from vibrant spectacles while others seek meaningful, authentic encounters. Key themes include the tension between spectacle versus substance, digital amplification versus analog intimacy, and community erasure versus reclamation. The study connects these empirical insights with theories of staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), emergent authenticity (Cohen, 1988), and heritage commodification. It shows how Melaka's strategic use of pseudo-events and technology can boost destination branding but also risks superficiality and community displacement. Practical recommendations include involving local communities in event design, mindful digital storytelling, and balancing entertainment with education to sustain Melaka's cultural integrity. This work contributes to theory by refining the authenticity spectrum concept, and to practice by suggesting guidelines for ethical heritage branding and tourism management.

Keywords: Pseudo-Events, Cultural Authenticity, Heritage Tourism, Destination Branding; Digital Tourism, Community Engagement, Melaka

Introduction

Heritage tourism presents unique challenges as destinations must showcase rich cultural histories while catering to modern tourists' expectations. Melaka City in Malaysia, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2008, exemplifies this tension. Its historic streets, colonial architecture, and multicultural heritage attract millions of visitors annually, yet rapid tourism growth raises concerns regarding cultural commodification. Particularly, Melaka's

tourism branding increasingly incorporates pseudo-events, which are staged attractions specifically designed for tourist consumption (Boorstin, 1961), alongside digital promotions such as social media campaigns and mobile applications to enhance visibility. Although these strategies may boost visitor numbers, scholars caution that they risk diluting authenticity (Boorstin, 1961; MacCannell, 1973). This raises the critical question of how heritage destinations can balance spectacle and substance to ensure culturally authentic experiences while utilizing staged events and technological advancements. This study is motivated by the urgent need to understand how authenticity can be preserved in the age of digital tourism and event-driven branding. Authors aim to contribute both theoretically and practically by developing a new analytical framework and offering insights that are relevant to policymakers, heritage managers, and tourism practitioners.

Building on a qualitative case study of Melaka, this research investigates perceptions and negotiations of authenticity among tourists and local stakeholders. Specifically, the study examines how smart tourism technologies and social media have been implemented in Melaka's heritage tourism and assesses their impacts on visitor engagement and satisfaction. Additionally, it explores the nature of staged events employed in Melaka and analyzes how such events influence tourists' perceptions of authenticity. Furthermore, the research compares Melaka's digital image, including portrayals on social media and online reviews, with the actual on-site visitor experiences. The study also evaluates how local stakeholders leveraged digital innovations and introduced new events during the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing the outcomes of these adaptations. Ultimately, this research seeks to identify effective strategies that ensure digital and event-driven tourism approaches enhance authentic heritage interpretation, encourage meaningful community involvement, and promote sustainable tourism growth.

The study introduces the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) as an analytical framework, challenging traditional binary views of authenticity as either entirely real or entirely fake. CASM conceptualizes authenticity as a spectrum ranging from highly staged spectacles to deeply genuine cultural engagements. This approach aligns with tourism theories highlighting authenticity as negotiable and co-created by both hosts and guests (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). By applying CASM, the research investigates where Melaka's heritage attractions and events lie on this continuum and explores practices that might facilitate movement toward more balanced and meaningful cultural encounters.

Literature Review

Pseudo-Events and Staged Authenticity in Tourism

Daniel Boorstin's influential concept of the *pseudo-event* refers to events intentionally staged for the purpose of gaining media coverage (Boorstin, 1961). Pseudo-events are "planned, planted, or incited" spectacles that blur reality for publicity (Hunt, 2020). In tourism, Boorstin observed that mass tourism often centers on contrived attractions that conform to tourists' expectations rather than foster genuine cultural encounters (Engelbert, 2017). These can include manufactured cultural shows, staged re-enactments, or promotional festivals that package local traditions for outsiders. The appeal is clear: pseudo-events offer entertaining and easily digestible experiences (Mariani & Giorgio, 2017). Yet Boorstin cautioned that they could replace genuine culture with inauthentic spectacle, causing tourists to confuse superficial displays with authentic experiences (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Modern scholars note

that pseudo-events can insulate tourists in a “tourist bubble” (Alshehri, 2024; Lee et al., 2022), where the exotic is sanitized and convenience prioritized (Mariani & Giorgio, 2017).

Contrasting Boorstin’s somewhat cynical view, Dean MacCannell (1973, 1976) introduced the idea of *staged authenticity*. Drawing on Goffman’s (1961) frontstage/backstage metaphor (Mariné-Roig, 2015), MacCannell argued that tourists are motivated by a desire for authentic experiences to escape the alienation of modern life. However, hosts often simulate authenticity by presenting curated front regions (e.g., preserved heritage streets) while concealing the true backstage of everyday life. For MacCannell, authenticity is not guaranteed; tourists often end up consuming staged cultural representations that still feel “real enough” to them (Supriono et al., 2023). This frames tourism as a kind of pilgrimage in search of truth, where staged presentations can provoke disappointment if they fall short of authenticity (Mariné-Roig, 2015).

The theories of Boorstin and MacCannell create a dialogue around tourist behavior, questioning whether tourists are satisfied with pseudo-events or are pursuing authentic experiences. Later scholars have added depth to this discussion. Cohen (1988) suggested that authenticity is flexible: some tourists actively seek genuine experiences while others focus on enjoyment and convenience (Zhang & Lee, 2021; Ronnes & van Toor, 2020). Cohen also introduced *emergent authenticity*, arguing that an initially staged practice can gain genuine cultural meaning over time as hosts and guests come to accept it (Zhang & Lee, 2021; Liu & Chang, 2020). Similarly, Wang (1999) distinguished *object-based authenticity* (the genuineness of tangible cultural objects) from *existential authenticity* (the tourist’s personal sense of authenticity). Wang argued that tourists can have meaningful experiences even in settings that are not entirely authentic, as the feeling of authenticity may arise from personal reflection and active participation (Supriono et al., 2023).

In summary, key tourism theories present authenticity as a spectrum ranging from Boorstin’s mass-produced spectacles to MacCannell’s search for deeper “backstage” truth, along with more recent perspectives that view authenticity as complex and shaped by individual perception. These perspectives inform the theoretical foundation of this study. We build on Boorstin’s and MacCannell’s insights while incorporating emergent and existential authenticity concepts. The Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model used in this analysis is grounded in this tradition, highlighting that authenticity is fluid and co-created rather than fixed. This model provides the basis for interpreting Melaka’s tourism experiences and branding strategies.

Digital Media and Heritage Tourism

The tourism landscape has been transformed by digital technologies. *Smart tourism* integrates ICT (e.g., mobile apps, AR/VR, IoT, AI, big data) into destination management to enhance experiences and efficiency (Buhalis et al., 2023). In heritage contexts, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) applications let visitors visualize historical events or reconstructions *in situ*, effectively “bringing the past to life” (Fauzi, Sharif, & Razak, 2022; Ravichandran & Nam, 2024). For example, VR headsets can recreate vanished structures, while AR mobile apps overlay historical information on real-world sites (Ravichandran & Nam, 2024). These innovations have been shown to increase tourist satisfaction and interest (Zhang, Papp-Váry, & Szabó, 2025). Digital tools such as QR-code information panels and

interactive exhibits (e.g., at Melaka's Laksamana Hang Tuah Mosque) also enhance learning and accessibility for tech-savvy visitors (Rozali et al., 2024). Crucially, studies emphasize that digital engagement should be respectful and interpretive like adding context without sensationalizing culture (Zhang et al., 2025; Pobl, 2020).

Social media and online travel platforms have likewise reshaped how destinations are marketed and discovered. Travelers now rely heavily on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) through Instagram, TripAdvisor, TikTok, and similar platforms to form expectations (Abbasi et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). Visually compelling content such as photos of iconic landmarks or lively markets can significantly influence destination choice (Zhang et al., 2025). Abbasi et al. (2023) found that when heritage images are perceived as valuable and receive active online engagement (likes, shares), they increase interest in the destination. In response, tourism boards encourage user-generated content and run influencer campaigns. In Melaka, official campaigns use hashtags like **#VisitMelaka** to amplify its image, showcasing colorful street art, colonial architecture, and local cuisine. These digital efforts raise visibility but also set high expectations. Managing the digital brand has become as important as preserving the physical heritage (Mustika et al., 2024; Tee, 2024).

At the policy level, Malaysia has embraced digital heritage branding. The *Smart Melaka Blueprint 2035* envisions a "Global Smart Heritage State" by leveraging technology while safeguarding culture (MIGHT, 2022). For instance, during COVID-19 lockdowns, Melaka's museums launched virtual exhibits and online tours to maintain engagement (Kurniasari, Ayu, & Octavanny, 2022). Visitor numbers plunged by up to 70% without these digital offerings, underscoring the need for "digital readiness" (Kurniasari et al., 2022). Post-pandemic strategies in Melaka focus on cashless payments, AI-based guides, and a robust social media presence to re-attract tourists (Tee, 2024). In short, digital transformation is viewed as critical for competitiveness and resilience in heritage tourism (Buhalis et al., 2023; Tee, 2024).

Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, single-case embedded design focused on Melaka City's heritage tourism. The case is bounded geographically by the historic city center and thematically by heritage-oriented activities. Within this case, two embedded units were studied: tourists and local stakeholders. An interpretivist paradigm guided the inquiry to capture the nuanced meanings participants assign to authenticity. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source. Twenty participants were recruited: ten tourists who visited Melaka in 2023–2024, and ten stakeholders drawn from local tour guides, heritage site managers, business owners, community leaders, and tourism officials. Purposive sampling ensured diverse perspectives, including local and international tourists of various ages (20s to 60s) and stakeholders from government, private, and community sectors.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Melaka's heritage zones between August 2023 and February 2024. A common interview guide was used (tailored slightly for tourists vs. stakeholders) covering topics such as perceptions of Melaka's heritage, experiences with events and tours, use of digital tools, and views on tourism development and authenticity. For example, tourists were asked how they discovered Melaka, what they expected culturally, and to describe moments they found memorable or inauthentic. Stakeholders were asked

how they present local culture, the role of staged events, how they use technology, and how they balance promoting tourism with preserving heritage.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing a structured interpretation. Both inductive and deductive coding were employed, with the CASM framework guiding the deductive phase. Initially, open coding identified recurring ideas and patterns (e.g., *nostalgia*, *staged event*, *community pride*). In a second round, theory-informed codes like *pseudo-event*, *existential authenticity*, and *digital engagement* were applied where appropriate, aligning the analysis with the CASM continuum. Codes were then clustered into broader themes reflecting the tensions between spectacle and authenticity. For instance, codes about flashy trishaw décor and lively night market ambience grouped under "visual spectacle," while codes about personal cultural connections grouped under "meaningful encounters."

To ensure research rigor, strategies of triangulation and reflexivity were employed. Alongside interviews, field observations and notes were taken during visits to key sites and events (e.g., the Jonker Street night market, Kampung Morten heritage village) to contextualize participants' comments. Member checks were conducted by sharing summaries of key findings with a subset of participants to confirm accuracy. The report uses thick description to convey participants' voices and context. Ethical measures included informed consent, anonymity for participants (using pseudonyms or descriptors like "Tourist 5"), and reflexive awareness of power dynamics during interviews. These measures support the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

This section presents findings from tourist and stakeholder interviews, showing how authenticity is experienced and negotiated in Melaka. The analysis draws from a wide range of voices and preserves original quotations while improving readability and flow.

Tourist Perspectives

Many tourists discovered Melaka through digital media. Platforms such as Instagram, travel blogs, and online reviews influenced their decisions and created strong visual and emotional expectations. A tourist from Singapore explained that she visited after seeing "*gorgeous photos of Jonker Street and the colourful lights by the river... It all looked so charming and legit*" (Tourist 3, female, 28, Singapore). Similarly, a German traveler noted, "*Travel blogs called Melaka a 'must-visit for culture lovers'... I already had a mental image drawn from those online posts*" (Tourist 7, male, 31, Germany).

These curated online images shaped tourists' emotional expectations, often framing Melaka as a nostalgic or culturally immersive destination. For some, reality met those hopes. "*When I stepped into Kampung Morten... I felt like I had walked into a living museum,*" recalled an Australian tourist (Tourist 1, male, 55, Australia). Others found the reality more chaotic. "*I expected Melaka to be tranquil, but Jonker Street was packed... It was more like a carnival,*" said a UK visitor (Tourist 5, female, 27, UK). She later returned early in the morning, when the streets were quieter, and shared, "*I finally felt the charm I was looking for.*"

For some tourists, authenticity was linked to personal memory. A Malaysian visitor explained, *"Kampung Morten reminded me of my grandma's stories... walking there felt like I was walking through a piece of her past"* (Tourist 8, female, 24, Malaysia). Not all visitors, however, came seeking cultural depth. *"We came for fun... Maybe it did not feel ancient, but it was exciting and that was enough for us,"* said an Indonesian tourist (Tourist 4, female, 22, Indonesia).

Guided tours were common and varied in quality. Some tourists found them enriching. *"Our guide told personal anecdotes about living under British rule... Nothing felt forced,"* said the Australian tourist (Tourist 1). Others viewed them as overly scripted. *"It was a bit like a theme park... I enjoyed it as entertainment, but I felt it was more show than substance"* (Tourist 7, Germany).

Unscripted experiences often left stronger impressions. An American tourist described, *"I sat quietly at the mosque courtyard... An older gentleman told me about the mosque's history... That simple conversation was the highlight of my trip"* (Tourist 10, male, 35, USA). These encounters felt spontaneous and genuine, providing deeper insight into the community.

Food experiences also became moments of connection. *"I complimented the sambal... She invited me to try pounding chili... It felt incredibly authentic,"* said Tourist 7. Others recalled moments away from tourist hubs. *"Sipping kopi tarik at a wet market... felt like I found the soul of the city away from the typical spots"* (Tourist 1).

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholders were highly aware of the complexities of curating heritage. A veteran guide explained, *"I have to choose the highlights... But I always worry I am oversimplifying"* (Stakeholder 5). Despite these limitations, efforts were made to retain authenticity. *"We consult cultural experts from each community,"* stated a tourism official (Stakeholder 2), reflecting an institutional effort to avoid erasure or bias.

Digital platforms were actively used to promote the city. *"We run Instagram, TikTok... but include short videos or captions that educate,"* said Stakeholder 2. Augmented reality (AR) apps were also being trialed. *"It could enhance learning, especially for the digital generation,"* added Stakeholder 5. However, some guides expressed concern about the effects of digital tourism. *"Many tourists come with a list of Instagram posts to snap... They miss the deeper stuff,"* observed a local guide, cautioning against overly curated, trend-driven itineraries.

Gentrification was another concern. *"Old neighbors sold their houses... Now Jonker Street is busy and booming, but I barely recognize it,"* said a long-time resident (Stakeholder 7). Tourism officials acknowledged the issue and noted zoning efforts and grants to retain cultural spaces, though challenges in enforcement remained.

Stakeholders often advocated for ethical branding. *"We avoid gimmicks... We film real events and real people,"* said Stakeholder 2. This was echoed by a museum curator who insisted, *"We turned down proposals to host unrelated events... Maintaining authenticity is part of our brand"* (Stakeholder 3). Concerns extended to how outsiders represented Melaka. *"The crew staged a 'ritual' that does not really happen here... We must be proactive,"* warned Stakeholder 5.

Community-led tourism efforts were seen as a viable solution. *"We emphasize that visitors are entering a living community... villagers themselves are the guides,"* said a Kampung Morten guesthouse owner (Stakeholder 10). These approaches gave locals control over their narratives while offering tourists richer experiences.

Grassroots initiatives played a crucial role in cultural preservation. Local guides ran informal walks that emphasized lesser-known places. *"We do these without a script... It helps people see beyond the postcard image,"* said Stakeholder 5. A mural project involving youth and elders added interactive storytelling elements. *"We created murals of old Melaka life with QR codes linked to oral histories,"* said a teacher (Stakeholder 8). Civic advocacy also supported authenticity. *"We got the council to adopt a heritage color palette... Activism is education,"* noted a café owner (Stakeholder 4). Heritage education initiatives targeted younger generations. *"We teach students traditional crafts and games... If they value their heritage, they will protect it,"* said Stakeholder 8.

Cross-Analysis: Alignments, Tensions, and Pathways

Bringing together narratives from tourists and stakeholders reveals a set of core dialectics that shape the experience of authenticity in Melaka's heritage tourism. These tensions reflect the complex negotiations between entertainment, heritage preservation, technological mediation, and community inclusion.

One of the most prominent tensions is the interplay between spectacle and substance. Tourists are often drawn to Melaka by its vibrant spectacles, such as the colorful trishaws, bustling night markets, and festive performances. These attractions are highly photogenic and accessible, offering immediate enjoyment. Some tourists, like Tourist 4, engage readily in these spectacles, valuing them for their fun and shareability. Others, however, express a desire for deeper, more historically grounded experiences, as seen in the reflections of Tourist 1. Stakeholders are acutely aware of this dynamic. They acknowledge that while such spectacles attract large crowds and contribute to the local economy, they can also obscure the historical and cultural meanings embedded in Melaka's heritage. Some have responded by adapting performances to include brief narrations or historical context, thus enriching the experience without sacrificing appeal. The Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) helps contextualize this balance, suggesting that attractions like trishaw rides can sit mid-spectrum, offering visual excitement while embedding elements of cultural storytelling.

A second dialectic centers on digital amplification versus analog intimacy. Digital platforms play a powerful role in promoting Melaka's image to a global audience. Many tourists arrive with online-generated itineraries, often shaped by social media influencers and travel blogs. A number of visitors admitted they were following lists of highly photographed sites and food stalls. This digital visibility, while beneficial for marketing, particularly in support of campaigns like Visit Malaysia Year 2026 (Tee, 2024), can also lead to overly scripted and filtered experiences. Stakeholders noted that heavy reliance on smartphones and predetermined checklists leaves little room for spontaneous discovery. In contrast, analog intimacy, such as unplanned encounters and unplugged engagement, often leads to moments of profound authenticity. For instance, Tourist 10's experience in a mosque courtyard or Tourist 1's interaction at a local coffee stall provided more meaningful insights into local life. Stakeholders expressed the need to balance these dynamics by meeting tourists on their

phones through digital outreach while simultaneously encouraging them to disconnect and engage more deeply. Innovative approaches such as augmented reality (AR) tours exemplify attempts to bridge this gap, delivering contextual information digitally while preserving physical presence and site-based learning.

A third tension emerges in the form of community erasure versus community reclamation. Tourism development in Melaka, especially in heritage zones, can displace or marginalize local communities. Stories from residents, such as one from Jonker Street, highlight how traditional neighborhoods have been transformed into tourist-centric spaces dominated by souvenir shops and eateries. Some tourists echoed these concerns, describing such areas as feeling hollow and lacking the vitality of local life. Yet, the search for authenticity often leads visitors beyond these commercial zones, into quieter neighborhoods and markets where Melakans live and work. In these spaces, tourists perceive a more genuine connection to the city's cultural identity. Meanwhile, community-led initiatives are reclaiming control over the tourism narrative. In Kampung Morten, for example, residents have created their own visitor guidelines, operate homestays, and educate guests about respectful conduct. Tourists consistently reported that experiences mediated by community members felt more authentic and enriching. These efforts align with UNESCO's call for inclusive heritage management, demonstrating how communities can benefit from tourism while preserving agency and cultural identity.

The final dialectic addresses market-driven versus ethically negotiated authenticity. Many heritage offerings in Melaka sit along a spectrum between pure commodification and conscious cultural curation. On the more commercial end are mass-produced souvenirs and staged photo opportunities, which represent Boorstin's concept of pseudo-events. These experiences are often tailored for convenience and immediate gratification but lack cultural depth. Stakeholder 7 noted how factory-made items dominate the market due to their affordability and appeal to mass tourist preferences. However, some heritage sites and practitioners have deliberately chosen a more ethical path. The Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum, for instance, rejected proposals that would compromise its historic integrity, opting instead for slower but more meaningful visitor engagement. Similarly, traditional performance troupes in Melaka have refused to overly simplify or commercialize their cultural expressions, maintaining authenticity even if it limits broad appeal. These decisions resonate with MacCannell's argument that travelers seek authentic encounters beyond the superficial. The findings suggest that ethical curation can coexist with commercial viability, attracting tourists who value sincerity and depth.

In summary, these cross-cutting tensions illustrate that authenticity in Melaka is neither static nor binary, but instead actively shaped through negotiation between various actors. The CASM framework enables a more nuanced understanding of where specific experiences fall on the authenticity spectrum. A neon-lit trishaw ride in Jonker Street might sit toward the spectacle end, while a quiet moment of conversation in a mosque courtyard represents the authentic pole. Most tourist encounters fall somewhere in between, their position shifting depending on the context and how they are curated. Recognizing the fluidity of authenticity opens new pathways for heritage tourism management. Stakeholders can design attractions and digital content with an intentional balance, encouraging experiences that integrate both excitement and cultural integrity. The subsequent Discussion section explores how these

empirical findings connect with broader theoretical frameworks and outlines strategic recommendations to support that balance in practice.

Discussion

The findings from Melaka reflect and expand upon foundational and contemporary theories of heritage tourism. Boorstin's (1961) and MacCannell's (1973) frameworks are evident in tourist behavior. Some visitors, like Tourist 4, embraced highly staged, entertaining experiences, echoing Boorstin's view that many travelers prefer pre-packaged spectacles. Others, like Tourists 1 and 8, sought deeper cultural engagement, aligning with MacCannell's notion of modern pilgrims in search of authenticity. Tourist 5's journey from initial disappointment on Jonker Street to a more reflective morning visit illustrates MacCannell's frontstage and backstage dynamic and reinforces the idea that authenticity is contextual and temporal (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988).

Cohen's (1988) view of authenticity as subjective and negotiable is strongly supported. Tourists displayed varied expectations, from immersive cultural interaction to light entertainment, confirming that authenticity is not universally valued or experienced. The Indonesian tourist focused solely on enjoyment, fitting Cohen's recreational tourist category, while others found authenticity in spontaneous or community-led moments. Some staged practices, such as trishaw decorations or cultural shows, have even gained legitimacy over time as locals reinterpreted them, exemplifying emergent authenticity. This suggests commodification does not always diminish cultural value if meaning is reclaimed by the community.

Wang's (1999) distinction between objective and existential authenticity further clarifies the findings. Tourists reported deep satisfaction when experiences aligned with personal meaning, such as the Australian visitor's sense of nostalgia or the German tourist's hands-on sambal-making experience. These cases show that existential authenticity can emerge even within partially staged environments, depending on the tourist's emotional involvement. In contrast, commercial souvenirs and performances offered fleeting enjoyment but lacked lasting impact for those seeking more profound connection.

Digital media also played a major role, shaping pre-visit expectations and influencing perceptions on-site. As seen in other studies (Zhang et al., 2025), Melaka's digital image often emphasizes spectacle, which can lead to disillusionment when reality does not match curated content. Tourist 5 experienced this gap firsthand. Stakeholders are increasingly aware of the risks and are shifting toward more ethical digital storytelling by embedding cultural education in posts, encouraging local content creation, and using AR tools to inform rather than distract. These efforts align with FAIR (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, Respectful) marketing principles (Chung & Day, 2024), reflecting a growing commitment to balance visibility with integrity.

The Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM) proves valuable in understanding these dynamics. It frames authenticity as fluid, helping interpret experiences that blend spectacle with substance. A trishaw ride, for example, may begin as a superficial attraction but become more meaningful through interaction with the rider. Similarly, historical sites can feel less authentic when over-mediated. CASM's continuum perspective allows us to move beyond binary assessments and recognize the co-created nature of authenticity in heritage tourism.

This study also contributes new insights to the literature. It bridges Boorstin and MacCannell's perspectives by showing that tourists often fluctuate between seeking spectacle and substance, even within the same visit. It provides real-world evidence of emergent and existential authenticity and illustrates how community-led initiatives and digital strategies influence the perception of cultural depth. Most importantly, it operationalizes the CASM framework as a practical analytical tool that accommodates the complexities of today's tourism landscape, including the impacts of media, commercialization, and community agency.

In sum, authenticity in Melaka is not fixed but shaped by multiple actors and influences. By viewing it as a spectrum negotiated through tourist-host interactions, stakeholder strategies, and evolving cultural practices, we gain a more accurate and actionable understanding of heritage tourism in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study explored how Melaka negotiates the balance between spectacle and authenticity in its heritage tourism branding. Drawing from qualitative interviews with tourists and stakeholders, and guided by the Cultural Authenticity-Spectrum Model (CASM), the study found that authenticity in Melaka is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic and negotiated process. Visitor experiences were observed to fall along a continuum between staged pseudo-events and deeply rooted cultural encounters. Most attractions blended aspects of both, demonstrating that hybrid experiences can be meaningful. For instance, a colorful trishaw ride that includes an engaging conversation with the driver offers more than surface-level enjoyment and contributes to cultural understanding. Viewing authenticity as a spectrum, as CASM suggests, provides a more nuanced framework than binary models.

The findings also emphasize that tourist motivations are highly diverse. Some travelers actively sought immersive, authentic experiences and were willing to adjust their itineraries to find them. Others preferred convenience and entertainment, expressing satisfaction with more performative or staged offerings. These differing motivations reflect the coexistence of what Boorstin described as the tourist bubble with MacCannell's authenticity-seeking tourist. A successful heritage tourism strategy must acknowledge and cater to this spectrum by providing both enriching cultural content and accessible, engaging attractions.

Pseudo-events were found to play a dual role in Melaka's tourism landscape. On one hand, they increase the city's visibility and marketability through visually appealing spectacles. On the other hand, if poorly managed, they risk diminishing the cultural depth that many tourists value. Both tourists and stakeholders acknowledged that overt commercialization could obscure or dilute heritage significance. However, some stakeholders identified ways to reduce these risks by involving local communities in the design of events and incorporating educational elements to retain cultural meaning.

Digital media emerged as a powerful influence on how tourists form expectations and experience Melaka. Social media and online content amplify the city's global presence and can generate significant interest. At the same time, such platforms often present polished and selective portrayals that encourage narrow itineraries and surface-level consumption. Stakeholders recognized this tension and described digital tools as both beneficial and

potentially problematic. When used strategically, for example by integrating historical context into augmented reality applications or promoting locally generated content that tells authentic stories, technology can enhance the tourist experience. However, overreliance on digital cues may prevent spontaneous encounters and reduce opportunities for genuine cultural engagement.

Local communities played a critical role in shaping tourists' perceptions of authenticity. Many visitors expressed appreciation for places where everyday life continued naturally, and voiced disappointment when areas appeared entirely commercialized. Community-driven initiatives, such as those in Kampung Morten, were seen as particularly impactful. In these settings, local residents actively manage tourism, set boundaries, and share their cultural narratives directly. Such efforts not only preserve cultural integrity but also distribute tourism benefits more equitably. Tourists reported that these experiences felt more sincere and memorable, reinforcing the idea that authenticity is best sustained when communities have agency and ownership over their cultural representations.

Stakeholders in Melaka also described efforts to pursue ethical branding strategies. These included engaging cultural custodians in decision-making, resisting misrepresentative portrayals, and empowering local voices in promotional content. Such practices align with calls in the literature for responsible and inclusive tourism development. The Melaka case demonstrates that ethical branding and authenticity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, presenting culturally accurate and community-driven narratives attracted travelers who seek meaningful experiences and built long-term trust in the destination.

Theoretically, this study contributes to authenticity scholarship by illustrating how authenticity functions as a socio-technical continuum in a real-world heritage setting. It reaffirms foundational concepts introduced by Boorstin and MacCannell while extending them through CASM, and by applying ideas of emergent and existential authenticity as discussed by Cohen and Wang. Methodologically, the study highlights the value of combining stakeholder and tourist perspectives in qualitative research to better understand the complexities of authenticity in tourism. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for tourism planners. These include designing events with community participation, leveraging digital media to inform rather than distract, and developing branding strategies that celebrate cultural depth and diversity.

There are, however, limitations to this research. As a single-case qualitative study, its findings may not be broadly generalizable. Melaka's unique status as a UNESCO World Heritage city with a multicultural history shares traits with other destinations, but direct comparisons should be made cautiously. The sample size of twenty interviewees offered rich insight but cannot capture the full range of tourist and stakeholder views. Future research could build on these findings through comparative studies in different cultural contexts, or through large-scale surveys that measure perceptions across broader tourist populations. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for tracking how the authenticity balance evolves over time, especially as tourism continues to adapt to post-pandemic realities. Further segmentation of tourist types by demographics or travel purposes could also help identify which groups are more inclined toward authentic or staged experiences. In addition, future research might explore the psychological dimensions of existential authenticity in highly mediated, digital

environments to better understand how technology shapes personal engagement with heritage.

In conclusion, Melaka's case illustrates that heritage tourism is not a matter of choosing between real and fake experiences. Instead, it involves the ongoing curation of a spectrum that balances spectacle with meaning. Stakeholders have the capacity to shift that balance by designing thoughtful events, promoting inclusive branding, and encouraging natural cultural exchanges. By doing so, they can sustain Melaka's living heritage while still providing compelling experiences for a wide range of visitors. As the tourism industry evolves with new technologies and changing demands, embracing the concept of an authenticity spectrum offers both a guiding principle and a strategic objective. It enables destinations to protect cultural value while remaining vibrant and competitive.

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