Authenticity and Commodification: A Visual Analysis of P2P Tourism Accommodation Listing Page

Yoon-Heng Lee
Department of International Business, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Shuang-Ying Low
Department of International Business, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Chiao-Hwei Low
Department of International Business, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Abstract

This study discusses the authenticity of local cultural experience afforded by the hosts of peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing economy through Airbnb. Authentic tourist experiences are frequently touted as the disruptive innovation that helps popularized P2P tourism accommodation. Past research on authenticity-seeking experience on peer-to-peer accommodation is scant; what's more, studies focusing on the provider/host are few and far between. Viewing tourism as an international system of global exchange between space and experience, this article seeks to explore the use of authenticity in Airbnb's host listings in attracting prospective travelers/tourists. Focusing on the top 20 Airbnb hosts of the two most popular tourist destinations in Malaysia, this study takes an innovative approach by employing visual analysis, in particular, the cover photo of the listing page. Initial findings suggest that both elements of authenticity and commodification are present in the host listing and thus blurring the differentiation between P2P accommodation experience and that of conventional hotel industry. The findings were enriched further revisit the problematic notion of tourism, and critically examine how the hosts market their offering. This article concludes that authentic tourist experience is crucial for the long-term sustainability and viability of the Airbnb hosts.

Introduction

The subject of authenticity in tourist experience is an enduring research topic for tourism (Wang, 1999). Scholars in tourism research generally viewed authenticity as a mixture of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual concepts that related to objective, constructive, and existential experiences (Kirillova, Letho, & Cai, 2017; Paulauskaite, Powel, & Coca-Stefaniak, 2017; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Authenticity is widely seen as a driving force that motivates tourists to travel to far and wide places (Cohen, 1988; Kola and Zabkar, 2010; MacCannell, 1973; Naoi, 2004; Wang, 1999). The emergence of collaborative consumption practices (Hamari et al., 2016) in the form of peer-to-peer accommodation (P2P) has had a great impact on tourist authenticity experience. It affords the locals to monetize their idle properties, and offered tourists the opportunities to directly interact with the hosts and their neighborhood. The most representative P2P accommodation to date is Airbnb, a peer-to-peer transaction-based online marketplace that matches hosts who wish to share their spare space with travelers who are looking for accommodation.

Airbnb's disruptive innovation (Christensen & Raynor, 2003) goes beyond just for the benefits of the tourists. By transforming once idling properties such as empty apartments and rooms to short-term rentals, Airbnb afforded the locals, who previously excluded from the tourism industry, to monetize their idling assets, local experiences, and knowledge. The growth of collaborative consumption, as in the case of Airbnb, has created a host of micro entrepreneurs. In Malaysia, as of March, 2018, there are 31,900 active Airbnb hosts, which represent a 130% year-on-year growth. Collectively, in 2017, Airbnb hosts in Malaysia earned US$48.1, more than double the US$23.3 million they earned in 2016 (Yeap, 2018).

Despite its significant grow and disruptive innovation brought into the tourism accommodation, research focusing on Airbnb's hosts are scarce (Gutierrez et al., 2017; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Most of the P2P accommodation research often focuses on the guests. Topics such as users' motivations and satisfactions are the most heavily researched (Choi et al., 2015; Guttentag, 2015; Lalicic & Weismayer, 2017; Tussyadiah, 2015). Research on how the hosts position and promote local authentic experiences is severely lacking. This is surprising given the fact that in P2P accommodation, hosts play a pivotal role in shaping and delivering the local authenticity value proposition (Tussyadiah, 2016).

This paper aims to fill these gaps and to contribute to extant literature of authentic tourist experience by furthering understanding of how the P2P hosts attract prospective tourists and reduce uncertainty of authenticity through visual image and title or headline in their listing. Furthermore, by integrating the concept of tourist destination image (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Michaelidou et al., 2013; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) into P2P accommodation, this paper investigates how the hosts position their listings vis-à-vis competing ones in influencing tourists' accommodation choice and booking intention.

The article begins with an overview of the literature of authentic tourist experience and peer-to-peer tourist accommodation. The article then introduces the empirical methodology, consisting of visual and textual analysis of the host listing. The themes that emerged from this analysis are carried into secondary data, which aims to throw light on host listing strategies. Following this, the discussion links the existing literature with the themes that emerged in the study. The final section offers conclusion, recommendation and suggestions for further research.

Literature Review

Authentic Tourism Experience

Authenticity has been widely recognized as the fundamental motivation for visitors (Cohen, 1988; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; MacCannell, 1973; Naoi, 2004; Wang, 1999). Because of that, the issue of authenticity is of particular important for the study of contemporary phenomena in tourism, especially with the disruptive innovation brought forward by collaborative economy in the form of Peer-to-Peer (P2P) accommodation.

In tourism research, concept of authenticity is a contested field with many different notions. The various conception of authenticity can be broadly grouped into objective, constructive, and existential topologies, all based on different philosophical positions (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). For example, the pioneering concept of authenticity from MacCannell (1973) is based on sociological foundation which look at various structural tendencies that shape tourists' experience (e.g. sacred and the shallow; front stage and back stage; reality and staged). McCannel notion of object authenticity emphasizes authenticity of origins of toured objects – that authenticity can be objectively identified through the property of objects and culture, and/or a subjective, socially and individually constructed perception of them (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Within this concept, authentic experience is an epistemological experience – perception of authenticity and knowledge of the originals of the toured objects even though the toured objects may be artificially created or staged (MacCannell, 1972).

On another hand, existential authenticity is rooted in existentialism philosophy. Wang's (1999) existential authenticity is primarily concerned with the experience of being true to oneself. Wang points out that there are many activities undertaken by tourists that are not object related but can be understood as a search for authenticity. These include personal or inter-subjective feelings that are activated when they are engaged in activities.

It is thus no surprise that authenticity is a fragmented and contested construct (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). This tension and contradiction are further complicated by the raise of collaborative economy, in which P2P accommodation companies such as Airbnb not only further democratizing tourism market (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016) but also accelerates the shift from commodity types of tourist experience to experience-based (Paulaukaite, Powell & Coca-Stefaniak, 2017).

Taking a pragmatic managerial perspective, Kolar and Zabkar (2010) highlighted that the main issue of tourist authenticity is not its ambiguity of various conceptions, but how these various conceptions can be constructively applied to positively influence authentic tourism experience. The question of how to apply authenticity to the listing is especially important for P2P accommodation hosts, which tends to consists largely of individual property owners or micro entrepreneurs who may lack of marketing skills in creating, presenting, and communicating their listings.

This paper adopts the constructivist position of Kolar and Zabkar (2010), and Olsen (2002) in the treatment of authentic tourism experience. Under the constructivist view, authenticity is a socially and individually-constructed, and it is a type of evaluated perception of experience that integrates both object and existential authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2016; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Olsen, 2002). The emphasizes of what deemed as authentic tourism experience is moving away from the roles play by tourists to the social and cultural process (Olsen, 2002), and simultaneously locate authenticity as a feature attributed to object by the tourist in a social process. Such integrative view of authenticity is helpful for a more dynamic conceptualization of authenticity. Furthermore, both types of authenticity are treated as an evaluative judgment; therefore, the extent/degree of authenticity could be evaluated in relation to either objects or existential experience of tourist. This approach recognizes that tourists' authentic experiences are not 'object-and-context' free. Rather, authentic experience is most sensibly viewed as "how people see themselves in relation to objects" (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006 p. 74). Objects therefore, play an influencing role in the evaluative nature of authentic experience of the tourist.

Destination Image and Authenticity Perception

Borrowing from destination image literature, past research on traveling destination have been dominated by cognitive components (San Martin et al, 2008). Cognitive approach is based on beliefs or knowledge a person has of the characteristic or attributes of a tourist destination (Baloglue, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004; San Martin et al., 2008). Guest review, a popular feature in P2P accommodation is a typical example of cognitive component.

Affective dimension is related to a person's feeling and emotion toward the tourist destination (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003). This subjective feeling may be triggered, stimulated by a simple photo or image of the destination. Studies have shown that affective elements represented through the image of a tourist destination have a significant effect on travel intention (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Michaelidou et al., 2013; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). However, affective elements of destination image are often neglected (Michaelidou et al., 2013).

Literature search on the use of photo or image of a tourist destination and authenticity perception reveals very little. A study in Taiwan comparing tourist operators - controlled and tourist-generated image shows that authenticity perception of a destination is socially and individually-constructed, and it is object-and-context dependent. Objects include those that are unique or iconic to Taiwan such as the Taipei 101 skyscraper. Contextual would include the local cuisine, and crowded streets (Michaelidou et al., 2013). The intertwining of objects and contexts form a holistic image which eventually produced the authenticity perception for the tourists.

An image of a tourist destination is thus best considered as holistic image embedded with affective elements that helps stimulate authenticity perception.

Image of tourist destination is an important element for the competitive success of the supply side tourism marketing (Telisman-Kosuta, 1994). This was evidence from Airbnb own research which found that well taken photograph used in the listing were booked 2.5 times more than those who did not (Subbraraman, 2011). The following section now turns to the Airbnb site which since its inception, has been emphasizes heavily on photo of the hosts' listings.

Airbnb Hosts and Delivering of Authentic Tourism Experience

There are several studies that investigate tourists' experiences in various accommodation settings such as bed-and-breakfasts (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007), resort hotel (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014), and rural accommodation (Loureiro, 2014). However, despite the importance of authenticity in P2P accommodation, there has been rarely the focal context for studying the concept of authenticity.

The rise of collaborative consumption practices (Hamari et al, 2016) and the creative disruption (Christensen & Raynor, 2003) best exemplified by Airbnb, had has a huge impact on authentic tourism experience. In the words of Brian Chesky, the co-founder of the most established P2P accommodation, Airbnb is a unique community that offers "(The guests) to learned our favorite places to grab coffee, ate the best tacos in the city, and had friends to hang out with whenever they wanted. They were thousands of miles from where they lived, and yet they felt right at home" (Chesky, 2014). The growth of Airbnb has afforded those with idling assets who were previously excluded from tourism economy, the opportunity to generate economic benefits by opening their property for short-stay holiday rental. The opportunities of living in a local residence offers guests the potential to interact with the host, and opportunities to stay in a 'non-touristy' area, and thus, potentially offer a more authentic experience. Not surprisingly then, 86% of Airbnb users cited opportunities to live like a local as the number one reason why they choose Airbnb (Ingraham, 2016).

Much of what Airbnb aspire to achieve - "live like a local" (Ting, 2016) value proposition is apparent from its image dominated website. This is evidence from the series of web page revamp undertaken by Airbnb since its inception that increasingly focus on the visual elements. Its most recent redesigned webpage witnesses a giant high-resolution listing photo that fill up two third of the screen size. Underneath the listing photo is the short title describing the listing, and brief information on location, renting rate, and number of guest reviews garnered. Information such as guest review, features of the accommodation are below the listing page which required scrolling down (Figure 1).
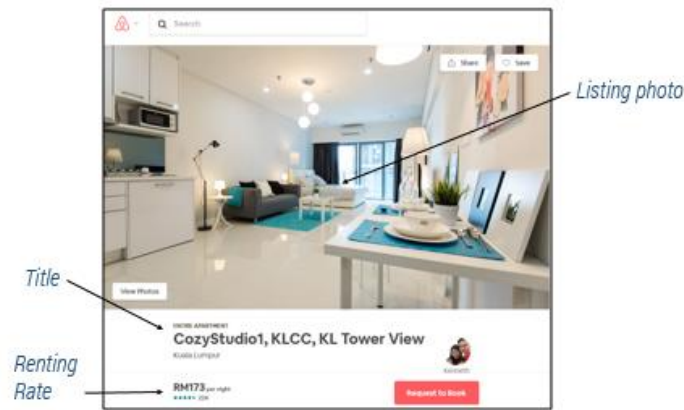
Figure 1: Example of listing landing page

Source:https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/11056299?checkin=&checkout=&adults=1&children=0&infant
s=0&location=Kuala%20Lumpur%2C% 20Malaysia&s=lxOiRftA

The completely revamped design is a clear move away from text search-based (product specific approach / structural) to image browse-based (general look up, no precise information/structure). The changes emphasize experience and trill of discovery in travelling (Lawler, 2014). Gone were the search box and basic slide show of properties, se were the drop-down menus and calendar boxes. Instead, Airbnb is side stepping the question of "where can I go" to "where do I want to go" (Carr, 2012). By doing so, Airbnb is promoting traveling on an affective platform, which is the "aspirational travel" (Ibid).

Despite their significant role in delivering local authentic experiences, research focusing on Airbnb's hosts is scant (Gutierrez et al., 2017; Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Most of the P2P accommodation research often focuses on the guests. Topics such as guests' motivations, satisfactions, and P2P attributes are the frequently researched (Belarmino et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2015; Guttentag, 2015; Lalicic & Weismayer, 2017; Tussyadiah, 2015). On the other hand, research on hosts tends to focus on hosts' trustworthiness and reputation (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Malazizi, Alipour, & Olya, 2018). Research on how the hosts position and promote local authentic experiences is severely lacking. This is surprising given the fact that in P2P accommodation, hosts play a pivotal role in shaping and delivering the value proposition (Tussyadiah, 2016).

This paper aims to fill these gaps and to contribute to extant literature of authentic tourist experience by furthering understandings how Airbnb hosts attract prospective tourists and reduce uncertainty of authentic tourism experience through the photo of the listing.

Methodology

Data Collection

Many disciplines from anthropology to marketing recognize the relevance of visual image in gaining new understandings (Michaelidou et al., 2013). Numerous studies show the significant role and strong link between photography and tourism (Ibid). This study uses cover photo of the hosts listing page from Airbnb. It however, departs from other image and tourism studies in that it uses only host listings' photo, and not others factors such as hosts' personal photos (Ert & Magen, 2016), and traveller-generated photo (Michaelidou et al., 2013).

This study involved top 20 host listings in Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown in Pulau Penang. These are the two most popular tourist destinations in Malaysia (Kaur, 2018). The top 20 hosts are generated by Airbnb algorithms which is a purely organic search engine. Although the exact attribute list of the algorithm remains a closely guarded trade secret, a "high quality" picture is believed to play a huge influential role in the ranking – the algorithm keeps track of number of visitors who click the photos based on the quality of the image (which indicate to it how appealing they are) and relevancy (Erin, n.d). Only the first photo, the cover photo in the listing page was collected. All together 40 covers photos were collected from each of the top 20 hosts on January, 2018. The listings URL and data collected were saved for analysis and interpretation.

This research focuses on the top 20 hosts with the assumption that being selected as the top 20 hosts by the Airbnb's algorithm, these hosts must have done something right. Therefore, they are treated as the 'role model" by this research.

Analysis of Visual Data

Visual data were analyzed following the line of social research with image (Tinkler, 2013). The visual analysis process involves first identifying the basic detail to help familiar with the visual elements. Every single object that appears in the cover photo were recoded, and coded. This follows by scrutinizing the listing photo focusing on what elements shown and how there were presented. Here, initial codes were developed based respective area of the property, for example, bed room, kitchen, and others. Subsequently, these material evidences are considered to understand how they can be experienced and used to convey the local authentic experience perception. This is the process in which the initial codes were transformed into relevant categories. Forth, understanding the context of those various material objects found. This involved interpreting the categories with the authenticity perception to form relevant themes. And lastly, focusing on reflecting the meanings of the photo by understand what the photo might means to the guests. The focus in this stage is on assessing the cognitive-affective dimensions of the cover photo.

Consistent with Mackay and Couldwell (2004), the analysis takes on a constructivist approach moving from descriptive to interpretative stage. The interpretation of visual data is cross-checked and triangulated among members of the research team (Pratt, 2009). The preliminary analysis of 40 listing photo and titles produced four different

categories each, which were then grouped and integrated into four key themes. Those four key themes are discussed in the following sections.

Findings

Cover Photo and Type of Listing

The two most popular cover photo appeared in listing page is the bedroom and the living area. This practice is similar with how the conventional hotel accommodations showcase their offering. Given the "live like a local" value proposition and the authenticity seeking tendency of Airbnb guests, the prominent of bedroom as the cover photo in the listing is somewhat unexpected from the findings. The reason is by convention, bedroom is closely associated with resting, and has little to do with traveling and mingling with the locals. Notwithstanding that for some of the hosts, the bedroom is the only space that available for rent, cover photos that reminiscent of a conventional hotel fails to convey authentic experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017).

The prominence of bedroom as cover photo for the listing mimics the established practices in the marketing of accommodation – fulfilled the basic needs by providing a place to rest. However, by commodifying their offering to fulfill basic needs of tourists, there seems to be little differentiation between Airbnb hosts and the conventional hotels, this is despite the obvious differentiation in terms of service quality, brand reputation, and security that are the important attributes commonly associated with selecting hotel accommodation (Chu & Choi, 2000; Dolnicar & Otter, 2003). The hotel-like image provides little incentives for the type of travelers that Airbnb is targeting.

The inability of the hosts to differentiate their positioning with that of conventional hotel accommodation put the hosts at risk of commodifying their offering, which may very well resulted in competing based on pricing. Therefore, the hosts may be succeeded in offering cost-effectiveness to the travelers, but the same cannot be said on the authentic tourist experience.

Staged Cover Photo

The impression of staging, or show-room like cover photo is apparent from the data. This may be very much a conscious strategy adopted by some of the more informed hosts. Airbnb has long emphasized the importance of 'nice' photo in attracting guests and entice booking (Subbraraman, 2011). In fact, staging to produce an attractive photo is one of the hotly discussed topics in many of the Airbnb community sharing sites. For example, the Airbnb community blog provides detail tips on "how-to-stage" to attract more guests. One of the tips given was "Learn from hotel bathroom, but improve" (Baer, 2014). It seems than that many techniques which were developed and used in real estate marketing are now being transported to Airbnb and its hosts.

The increasingly popular staging practices reflect the growing of commodification of hospitality (Lamb, 2011). However, the staging practice of Airbnb hosts should not be confused with that of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973) which was first conceptualized on tourist destination. But rather on the contrary, the staged photo

does not necessarily convey authentic experience, which this paper defines as a type of evaluated perception of experience that integrates both object and existential authenticity which is socially and individually-constructed.

Emerging Themes

Three themes were identified following the visual data analysis described earlier. The three emerged themes are (I) functionality; (II) relax and comfort, (III) experiential.

Functionality is representing by hard furnishing, audio-visual and home appliances with serve a practical and functional purpose for the guests. For example, home appliances like air-conditioning, Wi-Fi connection are deemed essential for creating a livable space. Most of those home appliances, hard furnishing elements look news, and in good condition. This shown that the hosts are making efforts to create what they thought would be an appealing atmosphere for the guests. However, most of the hard furnishing belong to mass market produced items such as from Ikea furniture stores that tells little about the host and the uniqueness of accommodation space, if any (Figure 2). Because of this, the overall interior atmosphere emits a sterilize impression which has little resemblance of home-like and authentic feeling.

Figure 2: Cover Photo of a Living Area

Source: Airbnb. The Spacious Colonial House- Houses for Rent in George Town, Pulau Penang, Malaysia. Retrieved from https://a0.muscache.com/im/pictures/1579bc62-b9b2-4ce3-a084-74577c402 7e8.jpg?aki_policy=xx_large

In short, the presence of hard furnishing, audio-visual appliance, and home appliance highlighted in the cover page of the host's listing signifies functionality which aims to guarantee and meet guests' functional needs.

Relaxing and comfort theme is derived from the presence of soft-furnishing such as lampshades, bean bag, towel, as well as readings materials such as books and magazines, and other home decorative items like in-door plants. These elements combined together to create an atmosphere for loosen up, sit back, unwind, and relax (Figure 3).

The relax and comfort theme is relatively more prominent with the bedroom cover photo. This is not to be unexpected as the bedroom is meant for resting and thus comfort is likely to be the top priority for would be guests. However, the relax and comfort theme closely associate with a confined and limited to indoor physical space i.e., the bedroom. Relax and comfort in this research context suggests a bodily form of rejuvenation. It can be argued that this theme has a resembling with how the typical. The affective and holistic form of relaxation was absent.
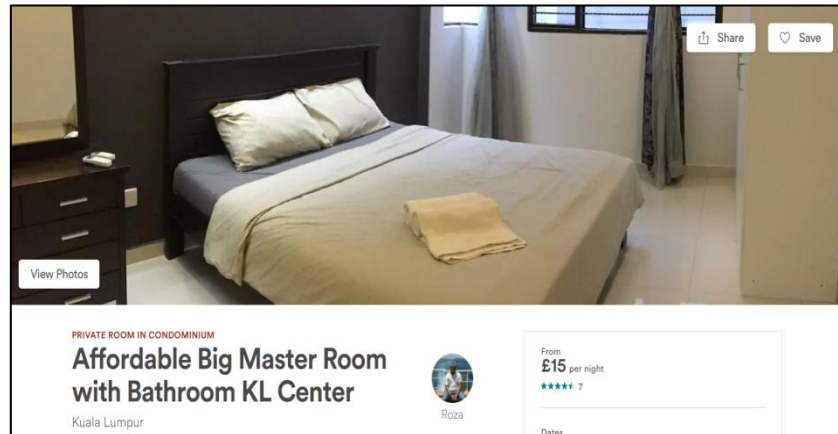

Figure 3: Cover photo of a bedroom

Source: Airbnb. Affordable Big Master Room with Bathroom KL Center. Retrieved from: https://a0.muscache.com/im/pictures/e7be1b08-5bfe-4011-909c69af321d01e3.jpg?aki_policy=xx_large

Experiential is the third emerging theme. This theme conveys the sense of pleasure, fun, and sense of grandeur which may lead to the creation of memorable experiences. For example, a listing's cover photo that shows a panoramic sea front view against the backdrop of sunset would be grouped under this theme (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Experiential Aspect of a Listing

Source: Airbnb. The Panorama @ Georgetown. Retrieved from https://a0.muscache.com/im /pic tures/7df5eb81-0d5c-4e61-a123bdb43910c6d7.jpg?aki_policy =xx_large

Compare with the other two themes, experiential theme is relatively less prominent and it is limited to the views or sceneries image of listings. For example, elements such as sea view, Mountain View, Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) night scene, infinity pool views and others. The theme is not very apparent but nonetheless, does emerged from the data and therefore included as part of the findings.

The first two emerging themes – functionality, relax and comfort are very much fell into the cognitive approach while the experiential theme is skewed toward affective dimension. Taking them together, the listings emphasize more on the rational judgment based on physical characteristic or attributes of the listing. This is a concern because the findings suggest the hosts are not well aligned with Airbnb's "Belong Anywhere and Live There" market positioning and are in direct competition with conventional accommodation hotels.

The larger issue involves is the issue of authenticity. The result of this study highlighted that the hosts are not able to differentiate their offering among themselves, as well as within the larger tourist accommodation industry. What's more, demand for a service like Airbnb is not a given, as Airbnb is considerably lacking in the many standard features of the conventional hotel accommodation (Guttentag, 2015). Disruptive innovation theory suggests that businesses that lack of traditionally favored attributes need to counter offer with 'alternative benefits" (Guttentag, 2015; Mody, Suess, & Lehto, 2017). While Airbnb hosts have been quick to offer cheaper price as a form of alternative benefit, they are however, as the finding of the research reveals, come out short in introducing tourist experience associated with staying with local communities. As a result, the level of inter-and-intra competition is likely to intensify. The effects of increased competition are evidence from latest available data which shown the annual median host income had been continuously slipped from US$1,600 per host per year in 2015 to US$1,400 in 2016 and US$1,200 in 2017 (Yeap, 2018).

General Discussion and Practical Implications

In the absence of agreement of what consists of tourist authenticity, this exploratory, qualitative research is carried out to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the tourism literature. The findings of this research suggest that the commodified, standardized hotel-like positioning of the top 20 Airbnb in Malaysia two most popular tourist destinations is undesirable as it negatively influence tourists' local authenticity experience. The hosts' inability to capitalize authenticity potentials afforded by P2P accommodation likely resulted an increase of inter-and-intra competitions. With the active listing increases from 18,000 to over 31,000 as of end of 2017 (Yeap, 2018), intra-competitions among Airbnb hosts is likely to heat up further and that may further depress the earning potentials of the hosts who are mostly micro-entrepreneurs.

The findings suggest the need for Airbnb hosts to adopt tourist authenticity approach and avoid commodity trap by following how the conventional hotel accommodations position and market their products. If the P2P accommodation hosts wish to achieve a sustainable and profitable position, it is advisable that they focus on developing a unique selling proposition by integrating social and cultural process with appropriate

objects (Olsen, 2002). Such integrative approach is deemed helpful for marketing authenticity tourist experience.

In line with the findings, the hosts should not solely promote their accommodation space emphasizing functionality, relax and comfort, but rather, position their offering consistent with Airbnb strategic positioning platforms - Belong Anywhere and Live There. This can be done by refraining choosing bedroom as the listing page cover photo, but instead, for example, suggestively showing unique local breakfast cuisine. Finally, the hosts should consider develop and take advantage of the role of affective elements in creating a perception of local authenticity. The hosts must reorient the role of accommodations, not just an accommodation space, but a platform for tourists to explore the larger destination and more authentic experience potentials.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample size for this exploratory, qualitative research is concentrated on two locations and not the entire nation although the data produced rich insights on the topic of authentic tourist experience from Airbnb hosts. Interpretation of the findings should supplement with quantitative data. There is a further opportunity to further explore, and validate the three emerging themes – functionality, relax and comfort, and experiential.

The authentic perception of cover photo, or broadly speaking, is predominantly individualistic and is subjects to one's own memories, associations, and imagination (Jenkins & McArthur 1996; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), and social process (Olsen, 2002). The aim of this research is on how the hosts use cover photo in their listing page to create an authentic tourist experience. The plethora factor that may affect formation of authenticity evaluative judgment is not covered in this research, and represents an opportunity for future research.

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