

Tourist perceptions and preferences of authenticity in heritage tourism: visual comparative study of George Town and Singapore

Nagathisen Katahenggam

To cite this article: Nagathisen Katahenggam (2019): Tourist perceptions and preferences of authenticity in heritage tourism: visual comparative study of George Town and Singapore, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: [10.1080/14766825.2019.1659282](https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2019.1659282)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2019.1659282>



Published online: 05 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 234



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Tourist perceptions and preferences of authenticity in heritage tourism: visual comparative study of George Town and Singapore

Nagathisen Katahenggam

Faculty of Hospitality, Food & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Commodification of heritage had allowed for the expansion of heritage tourism globally. Nevertheless, many cities grapple with the issue of authenticity in presenting the heritage tourist product, opting for ethnoscares with tourism friendly amenities. World Heritage Site cities, like George Town often face issues of balancing the need to retain authenticity while catering to tourism. Hence, understanding the perceptions and preferences of heritage tourists would aid in creating a more acceptable environment for heritage tourism. This research explores the perceptions and preferences of tourists in the heritage districts of Singapore as comparison. Sharing similar history, yet a different socio-political environment and preservation with George Town, Singapore's heritage districts had experienced extensive urban renewal fitting into the state-led historical narrative presented for tourism. Employing photography as visual representations and aided by Laddering and Means-End Chain Theory to generate questions, participants in Singapore elaborated on their visual experience compared to the photographic representations of George Town. The study indicates that demographic and geographical factors influence the preferences of heritage tourist. As such, rejuvenation of the city needs to factor in the interpretations of authenticity as perceived by potential tourists to ensure the sustainability of its status as a living heritage city.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 September 2018

Accepted 16 August 2019

KEYWORDS

Heritage tourism;
authenticity; George Town;
photograph interviews

1. Introduction

Heritage and cultural tourism are growing exponentially especially among developing countries as societies are increasingly appreciative of the diverse global culture (Coccossis, 2016; Gravari-Barbas, 2018). However, in the pursuit of heritage tourism, many cities face the dilemma in presenting the tourist product. Creating tourist friendly image and facilities risks creating constructed cultural veneer while fossilizing heritage cities may prove impossible (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1999; Nguyen & Cheung, 2016). Moreover, tourists in this regard are presented with the 'tourist-historic city' image where special spatial enclaves are created with well-preserved architectural forms as well as adequate tourism supplies (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2004; Timothy & Boyd, 2003) or urban landscapes

where the heritage and modern commerce are ingrained in a symbiotic relationship. As such, heritage cities experiencing urban changes face a dilemma considering the desire to preserve while catering to the evolving needs of tourism. Moreover, when the World Heritage Site (WHS) listing is factored in, the need to sustainably develop the city while retaining tourist interest becomes paramount. Some cities, such as Singapore had managed to balance between retaining its heritage enclaves while factoring in urban renewal. Given the intense touristification being experienced by George Town post-WHS status (Badaruddin, Omar, & Abidin, 2016; Chan, Lean, & Qi, 2017; Lim, Khoo, & Ch'ng, 2014), an understanding of the perceptions and preferences of heritage tourists in a similar heritage enclave that had experienced urban renewal is justifiable.

1.1 Authenticity and heritage tourism

The concept of authenticity in heritage tourism had been explored extensively in the past (Boniface & Fowler, 1993; Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Cohen, 1988; Lee, Phau, Yu, Li, & Quintal, 2016; MacCannell, 1976), where it is either argued from the perspective of rigid preservation (Theobald, 1998; Tiberghien & Xie, 2018) or from a more subjectivist interpretation (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). As a form of tourism that relies on socio-cultural assets to attract visitors (Fyall & Garrod, 1998) heritage tourism places a higher emphasis on the concept of authenticity as perceived by tourists (Boniface & Fowler, 1993; Taylor, 2001; Waitt, 2000).

Heritage tourism in this regard describes the experiential desire of tourists to consume the cultural and social landscapes of a locality deemed to be authentic, or existential authenticity as described by Wang (1999). However, modernists especially in urban rejuvenations believe that authenticity in heritage tourism is to be judged by experts and not by the tourists, hence the repurposing of heritage building along with ideas espoused by experts (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Due to the diverging approaches of authenticity, older cities undergoing urban regeneration focusing on heritage tourism often face the dilemma in attaching perceived value from the perspective of the tourists (Lee, Phau, Yu, Li, & Quintal, 2016; Yeoh & Kong, 2012).

In the context of tourism, perceptions of authenticity increase the value of a heritage destination (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). In effect, comprehending tourists' perceptions and motivations 'is helpful for the management of heritage sites with respect to such factors ... the mission of heritage attractions, and understanding visitor profiles, as well as public funding and sustainable management ...' (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2001, p. 1048). This is inherently related to concepts of staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), where host destinations create or repackage a tourist product as something authentic to be consumed.

Nevertheless, staged authenticity can be traced back to the political approach taken towards heritage tourism. Goh (2014) noted that heritage is essentially viewed as a tourism commodity or utilized to reflect the prevailing cultural ethos of a state. A semblance of both approaches are evident in Singapore's approach towards conservation of its heritage district. Heritage in this regard is viewed as a social and political tool towards nation building by creating idealized ethnoscares for the prevailing demography of Singapore (Henderson, 2009).

The debate on authenticity in heritage tourism itself had moved beyond the question of static representations of the past (Lugosi, 2016), towards how authenticity is interpreted

(Brown, 2013; Cohen & Cohen, 2017). For instance, the concept of tourist gaze or visual consumption by tourists is now ingrained in the debate of authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Urry, 2016) where acceptance of authenticity itself is dependent on tourist perceptions. Moreover, the conservation of heritage sites in Asia had taken on a more localized approach. In China, the demands of tourism set the tone for heritage conservation where cities priorities the preferences of prospective tourists in its planning (Fu, Kim, & Zhou, 2015; Yang & Wall, 2009).

1.2 George Town, Malaysia

The inscription of George Town as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2008 had shifted the focus on tourism in Penang to heritage tourism. The living culture of the city, especially the amalgamation between traditional trade and built heritage of George Town had allowed it to be inscribed as a WHS, recognized by UNESCO as a place where 'multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life' (UNESCO, 2009). Also known as a destination for gastro-tourism, the city is well regarded for its street culture and quaint decrepit period architecture (Eckhardt, 2010; Leng & Badarulzaman, 2014; Schreck, 2017). As such, heritage tourism in George Town can be identified as tapping into the nostalgia of an extant colonial era multicultural commercial trading city.

With the expansion of heritage tourism in George Town, the city itself is facing urban renewal. Traditional trade and commercial activities, as well as the local population are slowly being changed to confirm with the needs of a newfound tourism industry. To note, the heritage district of George Town faces a dilemma between conservation and commodification of heritage. In effect, the inner city itself is cautiously being seen as mirroring Singapore, where built heritage is repurposed extensively for commercial use while retaining little of the cultural vibe of the city (Yeoh & Kong, 2012). Arguably, the method adopted by Singapore in presenting its heritage in a commercialized form while retaining its cultural past had proved successful in conserving heritage buildings in a land-scarce island (Yuen & Hock, 2001). However, the issue of heritage and heritage tourism in Singapore is contained within the state's political nation-building identity, as such authenticity is arguably constructed.

Although the heritage district of Singapore is not listed as a WHS, both Singapore and George Town share the same historical narrative. Established by the British as commercial trading ports, both cities were part of the Straits Settlements until post World War 2. Independence had allowed Singapore to follow its own trajectory in development and conservation. George Town retained much of its heritage buildings due to the Rent Control Act 1966 and Penang's new focus on industrialization in the 1970s. State-driven conservation agenda adopted in Singapore is also observable in Penang, in the form of Special Area Plan for George Town. Undeniably, reification of dilapidated heritage districts does serve the tourism industry, however tourists may be the ones to be at the loss, consuming what is essentially constructed heritage (Yuen & Hock, 2001). As Singapore's heritage district, which shares George Town's architectural and cultural history had experienced urban renewal much earlier, its heritage district is well suited to be used to gauge the perceptions and preferences of tourists when it comes to the consumption of heritage

tourism. Against the backdrop of George Town's current touristification process, the perceptions of heritage tourists in a similar heritage district can be understood based on the fluid interpretations of authenticity in heritage tourism (Cohen, 1988; Goulding, 2000; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Taylor, 2001).

1.3 Heritage districts in Singapore

In the late 1990s, Singapore embarked on a mission to rebrand its remaining heritage buildings to retain a nostalgic identity (Yuen & Hock, 2001). Moreover, the potentialities to tap into heritage tourism also spearheaded the effort (Henderson, 2008; Lee et al., 2016; Yuen & Hock, 2001; Yung, Zhang, & Chan, 2017). Based on this background, remaining shophouses in Chinatown and others within the designated heritage zone were restored and revitalized for adaptive reuse (Wagner, 2017; Yuen & Hock, 2001). Boat Quay, located within Chinatown became an entertainment hub with pubs and bistros whereas Little India is revitalized and marketed as a hub for the Indian community Singapore (Henderson, 2008).

Pursuits to retain authenticity in heritage tourism remains debatable as tourist consumption of authenticity is highly subjective (Cohen, 1988). Given the negotiable nature of heritage tourism authenticity (Bobot, 2012), heritage precincts in urban settings are often designed to cater for mixed uses. Leisurely activities such as shopping, and dining are associated to the main highlight as additional facilities. This support role might be considered as the main attraction in the visitors' perception, putting into the argument of 'heritage theme park' into place. McIntosh and Prentice (1999) noted that tourist attractions such as medieval theme parks may ride on its element of heritage, but essentially the attraction lies on the notion of fun and enjoyment and is not based on elements of historical authenticity. As such, it can be argued that tourists visiting heritage cities may be driven by other factors apart from the heritage authenticity.

Due to these multiple uses, reasons to visit heritage precincts are often a combination of emotional and practical factors. Cultural distance to places, and nostalgia of specific period, whether lived or reconstructed through media influences the appeal that visitors feel towards the heritage destination. Association to familiar places and experiences are often used as a personal benchmark to assess the perceived authenticity of a place. This study wanted to capture these perceptions in comparing two urban heritage precincts with similar history, yet different socio-political environment and preservation.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a research design aimed to gain a clearer insight on the comparative perceptions of tourists on George Town in Singapore employing photo-elicitation method. Visual aid in the form of photographs were used as representations of George Town to elicit response from participants.

Photography as visual representations had been successfully used in previous works as surrogates for 'real' landscapes, due to its ability to correctly convey the richness and depth of a subject (Schwartz, 1989; Willson & McIntosh, 2010). Sun, Zhang, and Ryan

(2015) for instance employed photography to gather perceptions of tourists in Kaikoura, New Zealand while Ryan and Cave (2005) incorporated photography and semi-structured non-directive questioning in Auckland.

The research design is separated into two stages. The first stage involved the researcher engaging participants by showing 24 photographs of George Town. Selected photographs reflected a wider profile that depicts the cultural climate of George Town. This includes photos of traditional trades such as flower garlands and trinket shops as well as street hawkers. Also, profile of the heritage buildings in its current state and use were also taken to depict the cultural symbiotic relationship between the population and the built heritage in both cities. Since Singapore's remaining heritage town is not inscribed as a WHS, this paper adapts the definition laid out in the Urban Development Authority's Conservation Master Plan 1986 to conduct the photograph interview. The list includes Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and Civic and Cultural District by the Bay (Kong & Yeoh, 2003). The final compendium of 24 photographs was finalized from a bigger collection in Singapore's heritage district based on similarity of buildings and uses in George Town. For instance, Figure 1(a,b) were selected due to the similar scene, albeit a renewed image in Singapore.

The importance of photography in heritage tourism is more applicable because of the high degree of visual aestheticism involved in representing entire destinations (Cutler, Doherty, & Carmichael, 2016). As such, photographs depicting various façades of heritage tourism in George Town WHS were taken and used as the initial point of interview among the participants. The number of photographs selected was set at 24, complying with selections adopted in other photography-based tourism studies (Fairweather & Swaffield, 2002; Willson & McIntosh, 2010). It should also be noted that overwhelming tourists with a large number of photos increase the risk of them losing focus, hence photo selection should be reasonable especially in approaching tourists who are mobile (Fairweather & Swaffield, 2002).

The second stage involved short semi-structured interview sessions where participants were asked to reflect on what they have seen in the photographs with their current visual surrounding. Participants were also requested to select several photographs that they would wish to elaborate further. Then, they were asked to compare their visual experience at selected heritage districts in Singapore and the visual representation of George Town.



Figure 1. Similar scene in George Town and Kampong Glam, Singapore.

Notably, the use of select photographs depicting another city might lead to the question of bias. However, utilizing photographs helps to break the frame that inhibits immersive accounts from participants (Harper & Harper, 2010). Moreover, the selection of photographs depicting similar heritage buildings and surrounding between both locations would allow participants to reflect further on their preferences (Carlsson, 2001; Pachmayer & Andereck, 2017).

2.1 Utilizing laddering and means-end chain theory to develop questions

The laddering and means-end chain theory were adopted in the interviews to link visual observance with the experiential experiences of tourists (Jiang, Scott, & Ding, 2015; Lin & Fu, 2017; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2009). Although regularly applied in business marketing strategies, the means-end chain theory is adaptable for this study. The selection of products, in this case, the ideal heritage tourist city is often seen not to be influenced by its characteristics but rather the emotive meanings attached behind it (Jiang et al., 2015; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Essentially, this method is often employed in product marketing to understand the real critical attribute that makes for a selection of a product by a consumer, for instance the link between personal values and consumption (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). In this research, this method was adapted in the interview process to coach participants in 'laddering' their abstract responses to form concrete 'means' to their initial response to reach 'ends' that would better reflect their personal values in the responses (Willson & McIntosh, 2010). Utilizing this method, participants were asked probing follow-up questions to illicit responses tapping into their emotional level and personal values producing richer feedback that facilitates inductive analysis. For this research, interview questions that are based on the laddering method were used, such as 'Why did you select the façade of George Town's buildings over what you are seeing in here in Kampong Glam, Singapore?' (Any reason why this selection is important for you?) or 'Do you have any reasons why you would prefer that George Town's heritage district to mimic Singapore' (Do you have any personal experiences that makes you decide as such?).

The use of laddering and means-end chain theory in the interview process allowed for expanded volume of transcribed data. As such, the general inductive approach espoused by Bryman and Burgess (1994) had been applied to categorize and identify themes to understand the responses better.

2.2 Conducting the interview

The photo-based interviews were undertaken over a course of 10 days in late 2017. Over 60 participants agreed to the first stage where photographs were shown to elicit cursory responses. Out of this, 41 (68%) participants agreed to be interviewed further with sessions lasting from ten to thirty minutes each. In identifying tourists, the definition applied by the UNWTO was used (UNWTO, 2008). However, in ensuring the right respondent would be selected, the researcher engaged in 'ice breaking' questions to gauge the suitability of a prospective respondent. Such questions would aid in selecting participants and to create a relaxed atmosphere, so they would not feel like subjects of experiments (Morgan, 1997; Willson & McIntosh, 2010). Moreover, Miller and Glassner (1997) argued

that deeper personal insight can only be unearthed from participants when they are at ease with the researcher and the method of inquiry.

After the initial visual identification of prospective participants, a brief introduction of the objectives of the study and willingness of the participants to participate were gauged. Next, the booklet containing photos depicting the built and cultural heritage of George Town were shown to participants. Depending on the degree of openness and receptiveness of the participants towards the approach with visual images, the interviewer first inquired whether the participants visually preferred the urban landscape as seen in the photos or what they are experiencing currently in Singapore. Then, the researcher explored the possibility of the respondent being engaged in a more immersive interview. The 24 photos were loosely placed on selected categorization that places emphasis on the various feel and vibe of George Town to better align with the thematic classification of the interview questions.

3. Limitations

Several limitations inhibit this study. First, photographs failed to attach immersive accounts in the experiences of the tourists. For instance, when tourists from South Asia remarked on the similarity between George Town and the various cities of India, reasoning out their preferences of Singapore, they fail to note the multicultural vibe of George Town. While image representations are static, it excludes the vibrancy of amalgamated Chinese, Indian and Malay culture George Town is recognized with. Also, the intention of tourists visiting Singapore is not primarily driven by attraction towards its heritage district. As a commercial city-state, Singapore attracts business travelers and the city itself is also marketed for its shopping malls and newer attractions such as the Marina Sands Bay. As such, many tourists who were interviewed around the heritage district noted that their visit there were on the sidelines.

4. Findings

The use of visual aid in the form of photographs had been beneficial in understanding the perceptions of tourists to heritage sites and their views over the direction of which George Town should adopt. Moreover, the photos helped to nudge the participants to tap into their personal experiences in stimulating extended interviews (Matteucci, 2013). The findings are elaborated based on the main themes of the questions that were employed. Generally, the responses received can be categorized based on the demographic profile of the participants.

One of the main draws of heritage tourism is the visual cultural and built appeal associated with the sites (Watson, 2016; Wu, Xie, & Tsai, 2015). For instance, (Figure 1) depicts similar building scene in both George Town and Kampong Glam in Singapore. However, the heritage shophouses in Singapore had been refurbished for adaptive reuse while in George Town, the buildings still retain their original use blending in seamlessly with the surrounding. Having gone through the photo album in Kampong Glam, Singapore, Emmilia (32) from Germany took note of Figure 1(a) and compared the similarity and disjointedness of the photos with her location:

I feel that George Town looks a bit more charming, it looks like other towns like Hanoi. You get the feeling that so many things happen there, a lot of activities. Something that although it looks noisy and chaotic, I think it looks more charming. But, it looks nice here though, it's difficult to tell if it is really old or recently built. Maybe the buildings here look too uniform, like the same paint being used. Maybe it looks nice to some, but I think the worn out look of George Town looks appealing.

Generally, several participants from Europe provided similar observations. Porter, (53) from the UK observed

It's about how charming a place looks, of course it looks very cozy and nice here, but George Town is a bit more charming since we just came back from there. You get a homely sense. Here, you can see some skyscrapers in the background, you don't really get to see that in George Town. But I admit, both cities look somewhat same, you can get the idea that Singapore here used to look like George Town.

Interestingly, responses shared by tourists from South Asia lays out a different insight into the visual charms of both cities. As described by Archunan, (30) from India on [Figure 2\(a\)](#);

Looking at the pictures of George Town, although the buildings seem to be the same, in Singapore it looks much better and well maintained. I would say it looks pleasing to see, the pictures of George Town look like the city is not well maintained and reminds of me the many towns in India. If you ask me, the colorful old buildings here in Singapore looks much nicer for me.

Applying the laddering method to allow for a deeper insight into the visual narratives of South Asian tourists, Purvith, (28) and Tisya, (25) noted that:

Heritage buildings or heritage cities should actually try to clean up, give the city a new vibe. Repaint the buildings, maintain it properly. It shouldn't be left to become derelict because in India, many of the old buildings, shophouses built during the colonial age or even older buildings are sometimes just left to rot even if people are still using it. It is unsightly to see, I don't think a derelict looking city feels nice. I hope George Town tries to follow Singapore.

Similarly, tourists who had been to George Town noted that the city looks more pleasing visually, as opposed to Singapore's heritage district. Notably though, several participants especially young adults from East Asia indicated that Singapore's heritage district look appealing and 'organized'. For instance, Wei-Rey, (21) from Taiwan explained:

I think George Town looks nice ... especially with the street arts. Maybe I didn't realize it then, but looking at your pictures, I agree that George Town doesn't look as organized as here.

Elaborating on the term 'organized':

We found it difficult to cycle sometimes with motorbikes and many things blocking the paths. Like here, it is clean and organized where you don't see things simply placed at places you want to walk to the cycling paths. Maybe George Town can follow Singapore.

As images are polysemic (Barthes, 1977), allowing for several meanings, visualization would also create space for synaesthetic experiences (Matteucci, 2013). To elaborate, stimulation of one sense after looking through several pictures may ignite other senses that may dominate the recollection of events. For instance, looking through photos that depict traditional street trade in George Town, several participants noted that they can

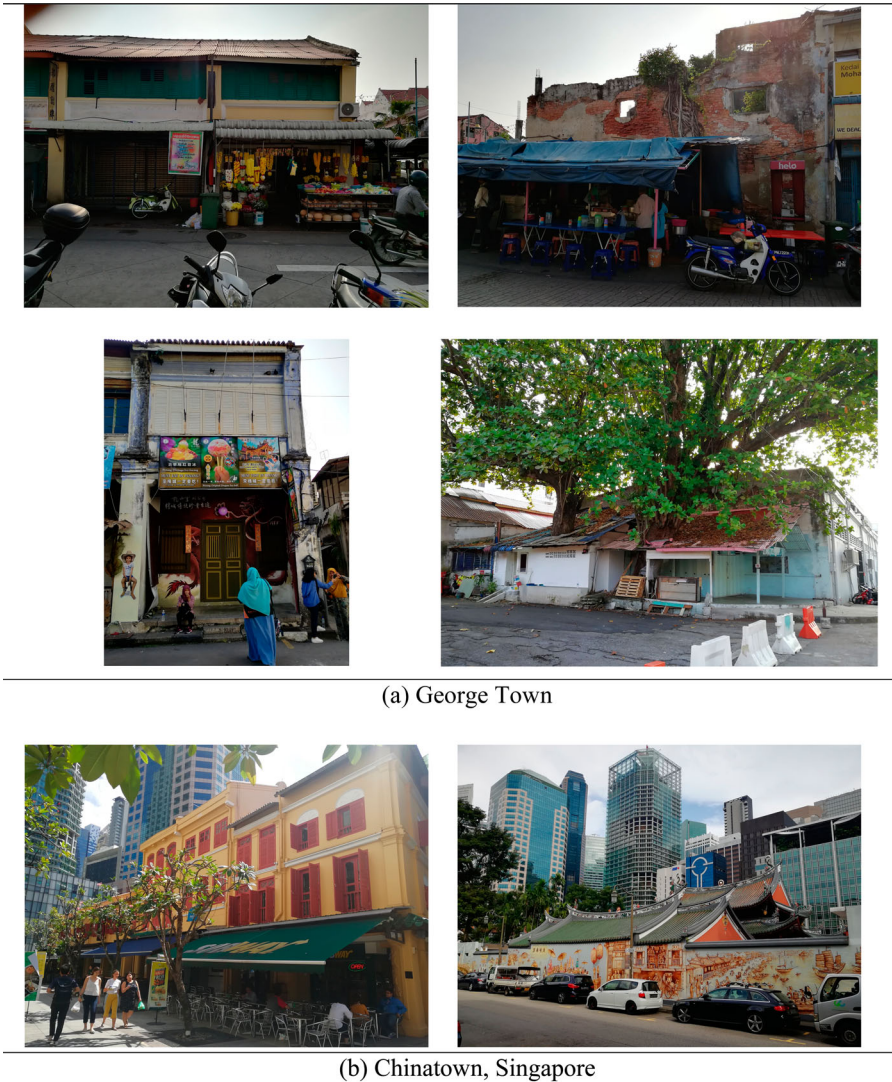


Figure 2. Contrasting images of George Town and Chinatown, Singapore.

smell the streets of the city and started reminiscing their previous visits to both George Town and Singapore. Elaborating on [Figure 1\(a\)](#) and [Figure 2\(a\)](#), Dale, (70s) observed:

Looking at the photos of George Town, I don't think the city itself had changed so much since I saw it when I was stationed with RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) Base in Butterworth in the 70s. Of course, Penang looks so different, but the inner city looks pretty much the same. I can even smell the spices and the herbs that they used to sell there looking at the pictures. Here in Singapore, there are some shops that are selling similar things, but the Chinatown itself doesn't look like how it was in those days. You don't see any hawkers now, but in George Town you can smell things being fried and sold.

Similarly, delving deeper into the interview process, the researcher could gain insight into the preference of an American tourist who was raised in Singapore in the 1960s. Matthew, (61) observed:

Maybe because I am nostalgic, I quite like the image of George Town, Singapore used to be like this, it has changed now. I am not actually comparing, Singapore needed to move away from its past to progress. So, it's a decision they had to make, but it is sad. It's not too bad, you still have places like this (Chinatown, Singapore) where the buildings are preserved.

Some participants took on a more conciliatory approach towards what they observe in the photos and their surroundings. For instance, Sophie, (32) from the Netherlands noted:

I have been to George Town, I can't say that Singapore's heritage site looks anything like George Town. For me, each city has its own attraction and unique by itself. It's not fair to compare George Town and Singapore. I don't think George Town should start to look like Singapore, if that's the case then why would we visit it? Singapore has more modern vibe to it, let George Town be what it is now. You would have more tourists this way.

However, for tourists from South Asia, the images of George Town do not appeal as much as the lure of tourism in Singapore. As observed by Archunan, (30) from India:

I don't think I would want to pay so much and travel to George Town and see buildings and situation that looks like India. I like what I see here in Singapore, I can experience modernity and how old buildings are used as cafes and such and are redone properly.

Arguably, the dissonant response received from South Asia tourists can be elaborated based on the preferences associated with 'exotic cultural tourism' (Lee, Ko, Moon, & Park, 2016; Wilkinson, 2008; Xie & Wall, 2008). The low distance level between the local culture of George Town and those found in South Asia may limit the sense of exoticism observed during travel hence reducing the appeal of George Town. However, the amalgamation of familiar heritage buildings with facets associated with modernity such as order, hygiene and efficiency are perceived as an added value for the tourists to experience in Singapore.

On another note, several participants, notably those in their 20s and mid 30s viewed the images of George Town unfavorably, opting for the more orderly Chinatown in Singapore. The views were summarized by Ethan, (28) from Hong Kong:

We came here to hang out at the pubs here. It's nice and clean to relax and just hang with people here. We won't like if the place is dirty or a bit chaotic, the photos showing George Town looks like places you get to see in Thailand, the pubs there are nice too but sometimes a bit noisy and maybe not so clean or pleasing.

Participants from similar demography also preferred the sanitized version of the city as elaborated by Xiao, (20s) from Taiwan:

We were in George Town for several days really looked forward to head to Singapore. The city is nice because some parts look the same with Taiwan but you have the Indian shops also. I think more should be done to like to paint the place nicely, keep it repaired. Sometimes you feel it is not so clean or looks rundown. It should look like Singapore.

5. Retrospection and conclusion

Interestingly, the responses received could be narrowed down to demographic and geographical preferences. Tourists from South Asia were generally in favor with the touristified heritage image of Singapore. Meanwhile, those in their 20s and 30s were nonchalant over the role of heritage in their visits or preferred a retention of roles for both sites. Arguably,

although adaptive reuse of heritage buildings in Singapore were first planned and initiated to retain its traditional use especially in trade (Teo & Huang, 1995), façadism had gained ground especially within Chinatown. In this regard, the direction adopted by Singapore ensures the tourist dollars are able to benefit the community and the nation while retaining a semblance of national identity by ensuring the nation's past is still visible (Chang, 2016; Henderson, 2008).

As the outlook on authenticity in heritage tourism are diverse (Cohen & Cohen, 2012), it is difficult to clearly point out the preference of tourists to a heritage site. Engaging in immersive visual account using photos among tourists in both Singapore and George Town clearly indicate various choices and understanding. However, given that visual appeal from tangible heritage being the primary marker for authenticity (Naoui, 2004; Waitt, 2000; Wang, 1999), preservation of architectural attributes of heritage buildings, especially the shophouses in George Town would better reflect the city's branding as a heritage tourism destination. George Town is still grappling on the identity of its tourists. There are still lingering questions whether mass tourism or heritage tourism are the main draw for the city. Moreover, George Town is increasingly being identified by its street mural against the backdrop of its heritage buildings. As such, it can be argued that the city itself is attracting a diverse range of tourists against a background of heritage tourism. Based on the responses gained from the study, demographic identification of tourists would create a clearer picture of the preferences of tourists when it comes to authenticity. As part of a broader tourism product that focuses on shopping and newer tourist attractions, rejuvenation based on facadism of its heritage enclave fits into Singapore's tourism objectives. However, the notion of 'living cultural city' is expected of George Town, hence the need to ensure its rejuvenation to confirm to the expectations of tourists. Arguably, commercialization of heritage for tourism is part of any cultural heritage city (Verdini, Frassoldati, & Nolf, 2017; Zhang, Fyall, & Zheng, 2015). Hence, evading commercialized touristification would prove difficult even when efforts are afoot to retain a cultural vibe within the heritage city.

Placed on a wider context, this research is congruent with the arguments of Cohen (1988), Cohen and Cohen (2012), and Ashworth (1997, 1998) where authenticity is seen to be dynamic by heritage tourists. Naturally, arguments especially by conservationists prefer a more static approach towards authenticity, in the case of Singapore, the dearth of living communities in its heritage districts are argued as being inauthentic (Kong & Yeoh, 2003; Yeoh & Kong, 2012). Nevertheless, participants from South Asia with their preference for the exotic appeal of refurbished heritage buildings of Singapore against those of George Town clearly shows that authenticity is inherently subjective, influenced by local cultural and emotional context.

Although subjective, the expectation of authenticity can still be classified based on the general preferences of tourists. For George Town, its authentic charm is reliant on its ability to retain its cultural identity, evidenced by its retention of hawker and small trades within the heritage city. Current revitalization efforts under the banner of urban renewal in George Town risks refocusing the view on authenticity as practiced in Singapore. The revitalization of back lanes for instance sanitizes the city, removing current social interaction identified with a living city. This approach is arguably emulating Singapore's approach towards heritage tourism and foregoing the advantage of living culture existing in George Town.

Utilizing the preferences of tourists in revitalizing a heritage city brings in the argument of the imposing nature of tourism (Chhabra et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the prospect of tourism had allowed George Town to be rejuvenated after the decay of the city. In effect, preservation of cultural activities had often been credited to the needs of tourism (Fu et al., 2015; Yang & Wall, 2009). As such, aligning rejuvenation of heritage cities with the preferences and perceptions of tourists would allow for the sustainability of George Town's identity as a living cultural city.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Taylor's University through its Taylor's University World Fellowship Program.

Notes on contributor

Nagathisen Katahenggam is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in heritage tourism governance. Drawing on the diverging level of involvement of government in tourism, his research interest focusses on the political leverage exerted by the state in tourism development.

References

- Ashworth, G. J. (1997). Struggling to control the past. *In Focus*, 22, 4–5.
- Ashworth, G. J. (1998). Heritage, identity and interpretig a European sense of place. In D. Uzzell & R. Ballantyne (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in heritage and environmental interpretation* (pp. 112–132). London: The Stationary Office.
- Ashworth, G. J., & Tunbridge, J. E. (2004). Whose tourist-historic city? Localizing the global and globalizing the local. *In A Companion to tourism* (pp. 210–222). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Badaruddin, M., Omar, S. I., & Abidin, S. Z. Z. (2016). The Perils of tourism growth in a world heritage site: The case of George Town, Penang heritage site. *In 5th international conference of Jabodetabek study forum, At Bogor, Indonesia* (pp. 214–223). Bogor: Crestprent Press.
- Barthes, R. (1977). Rhetoric of the image. *In Image, music, text* (pp. 32–51). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bobot, L. (2012). Negotiating authenticity: Cathar heritage tourism. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 7(2), 163–177.
- Boniface, P., & Fowler, P. (1993). *Heritage and tourism in the global village*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brown, L. (2013). Tourism: A catalyst for existential authenticity. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 40, 176–190.
- Bryman, A., & Burgess, R. (1994). Reflections on qualitative data analysis. *In Analysing qualitative data* (pp. 216–226). London: Routledge.
- Carlsson, B. (2001). Depicting experiences. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 45(2), 125–143.
- Chan, J., Lean, H. H., & Qi, X. (2017). Transition of economic structure and demography: The case of tourism gentrification in George Town, Penang. *International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas Conference 2017*, 1.
- Chang, T. C. (2016). 'New uses need old buildings': Gentrification aesthetics and the arts in Singapore. *Urban Studies*, 53(3), 524–539.
- Chhabra, D., Healy, R., & Sills, E. (2003). Staged authenticity and heritage tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(3), 702–719.

- Coccosis, H. (2016). Sustainable development and tourism: Opportunities and threats to cultural heritage from tourism, 65–74.
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), 371–386.
- Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2012). Current sociological theories and issues in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(4), 2177–2202.
- Cohen, S. A., & Cohen, E. (2017). New directions in the sociology of tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(2), 1–20.
- Cutler, S. Q., Doherty, S., & Carmichael, B. (2016). Immediacy, photography and Memory: The tourist experience of Machu Picchu. In B. Graham, M. Gravari-Barbas, & M. Robinson (Eds.), *World heritage, tourism and identity* (pp. 131–146). Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Eckhardt, R. (2010, December 2). In Malaysia, tourists are lured by George Town's colorful past. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/05/travel/05georgetown-nextstop.html>
- Fairweather, J. R., & Swaffield, S. R. (2002). Visitors' and locals' experiences of Rotorua, New Zealand: An interpretative study using photographs of landscapes and Q method. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4(4), 283–297.
- Fu, Y., Kim, S., & Zhou, T. (2015). Staging the 'authenticity' of intangible heritage from the production perspective: The case of craftsmanship museum cluster in Hangzhou, China. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 13(4), 285–300.
- Fyall, A., & Garrod, B. (1998). Heritage tourism: At what price? *Managing Leisure*, 3(4), 213–228.
- Goh, D. P. S. (2014). Between history and heritage: Post-colonialism, globalisation, and the remaking of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 2(1), 79–101.
- Goulding, C. (2000). The commodification of the past, postmodern pastiche, and the search for authentic experiences at contemporary heritage attractions. *European Journal of Marketing*, 34(7), 835–853.
- Gravari-Barbas, M. (2018). Tourism as a heritage producing machine. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 25, 173–176.
- Harper, D., & Harper, D. (2010). Talking about pictures : A case for photo elicitation Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation, (October 2014), 37–41.
- Henderson, J. C. (2008). Managing urban ethnic heritage: Little India in Singapore. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14(4), 332–346.
- Henderson, J. C. (2009). The meanings, marketing, and management of heritage tourism in Southeast Asia. In *Cultural heritage and tourism in the developing world: A regional perspective* (pp. 73–92). London: Routledge.
- Jiang, S., Scott, N., & Ding, P. (2015). Using means-end chain theory to explore travel motivation. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 21(1), 87–100.
- Kolar, T., & Zabkar, V. (2010). A consumer-based model of authenticity: An oxymoron or the foundation of cultural heritage marketing? *Tourism Management*, 31(5), 652–664.
- Kong, L., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2003). *The politics of landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of 'nation'*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Lee, W. S., Ko, D. W., Moon, J., & Park, J. (2016). Non-Asian tourists' preferred attributes: A choice experiment. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 21(12), 1300–1309.
- Lee, S., Phau, I., Yu, M. H., Li, F., & Quintal, V. (2016). Heritage tourism in Singapore Chinatown: A perceived value approach to authenticity and satisfaction. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 33(7), 981–998.
- Leng, K. S., & Badarulzaman, N. (2014). Branding George Town world heritage site as city of gastronomy: Prospects of creative cities strategy in Penang. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research*, 8(3), 322–332.
- Lim, Y. M., Khoo, S. L., & Ch'ng, K. S. (2014). Residents' perspectives towards conservation in George Town world heritage city: A post-UNESCO listing scenario. *Journal of Urban and Regional Analysis*, 6(2), 161–180.

- Lin, C.-F., & Fu, C.-S. (2017). Changes in tourist personal values: Impact of experiencing tourism products and services. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 22(2), 173–186.
- Lugosi, P. (2016). *Socio-technological authentication*. *Annals of tourism research* (Vol. 58). Oxford: Pergamon.
- MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589–603. doi:10.1086/225585
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The visitor: A new theory of the leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books.
- MacCannell, D. (1999). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Matteucci, X. (2013). Photo elicitation: Exploring tourist experiences with researcher-found images. *Tourism Management*, 35, 190–197.
- McIntosh, A. J., & Prentice, R. (1999). Affirming authenticity: Consuming cultural heritage. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(3), 589–612.
- Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (1997). The “inside” and the “outside”: Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (pp. 99–112). London: Sage.
- Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Naoi, T. (2004). Visitors’ evaluation of a historical district: The roles of authenticity and manipulation. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 5(1), 45–63.
- Nguyen, T. H. H., & Cheung, C. (2016). Toward an understanding of tourists’ authentic heritage experiences: Evidence from Hong Kong. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 33(7), 999–1010.
- Nunkoo, R., & Ramkissoon, H. (2009). Applying the means-end chain theory and the laddering technique to the study of host attitudes to tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 17(3), 337–355.
- Pachmayer, A., & Andereck, K. L. (2017). Photo elicitation in tourism research: Investigating the travel experiences of study abroad participants.
- Poria, Y., Butler, R., & Airey, D. (2001). Clarifying heritage tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28, 1047–1049.
- Reisinger, Y., & Steiner, C. J. (2006). Reconceptualizing object authenticity. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(1), 65–86.
- Reynolds, T. J., & Gutman, J. (1988). Laddering theory, method, analysis, and interpretation. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 28(1), 11–31.
- Ryan, C., & Cave, J. (2005). Structuring destination image: A qualitative approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 44(2), 143–150.
- Schreck, A. (2017, December 22). On the Island of Penang, it’s all about art, eats and old streets. *TheRecord.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.therecord.com/living-story/8016981>
- Schwartz, D. (1989). Visual ethnography: Using photography in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 12(2), 119–154.
- Sun, M., Zhang, X., & Ryan, C. (2015). Perceiving tourist destination landscapes through Chinese eyes: The case of South island, New Zealand. *Tourism Management*, 46, 582–595.
- Taylor, J. P. (2001). Authenticity and sincerity in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28(1), 7–26.
- Teo, P., & Huang, S. (1995). Tourism and heritage conservation in Singapore. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22(3), 589–615.
- Theobald, W. (1998). *Global tourism* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Tiberghien, G., & Xie, P. F. (2018). The life cycle of authenticity: Neo-nomadic tourism culture in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 16(3), 234–247.
- Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2003). *Heritage tourism*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- UNESCO. (2009). Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca – UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Retrieved from <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223>
- UNWTO. (2008). *International recommendations for tourism statistics 2008*. New York: UNWTO.
- Urry, J. (2016). *Mobilities: New perspectives on transport and society*. New York: Routledge.
- Verdini, G., Frassoldati, F., & Nolf, C. (2017). Reframing China’s heritage conservation discourse. Learning by testing civic engagement tools in a historic rural village. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23(4), 317–334.
- Wagner, A. (2017). *Malaysian shophouses: Creating cities of character*. Architecture undergraduate honors theses. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas.

- Waitt, G. (2000). Consuming heritage: Perceived historical authenticity. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 27(4), 835–862.
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349–370.
- Watson, S. (2016). *Culture, heritage and representation: Perspectives on visibility and the past*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilkinson, P. F. (2008). Cultural tourism in a changing world: Politics, participation and (Re)presentation. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 11(2), 205–206.
- Willson, G., & McIntosh, A. (2010). Using photo-based interviews to reveal the significance of heritage buildings to cultural tourism experiences. In Richards & Munsters (Eds.), *Cultural tourism research methods* (pp. 141–155). Wallingford: CABI.
- Wu, T. C. (Emily), Xie, P. F., & Tsai, M. C. (2015). Perceptions of attractiveness for salt heritage tourism: A tourist perspective. *Tourism Management*, 51, 201–209.
- Xie, P. F., & Wall, G. (2008). Authenticating ethnic tourism attractions. In *Managing visitor attractions: Second edition* (pp. 132–147). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Yang, L., & Wall, G. (2009). Authenticity in ethnic tourism: Domestic tourists' perspectives. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 12(3), 235–254.
- Yeoh, B. S. A., & Kong, L. (2012). Singapore's Chinatown: Nation building and heritage tourism in a multiracial city. *Localities*, 2, 117–159.
- Yuen, B., & Hock, N. T. (2001). Urban conservation in Singapore: Tradition or tourist Bane? *Planning Practice and Research*, 16(1), 39–50.
- Yung, E. H. K., Zhang, Q., & Chan, E. H. W. (2017). Underlying social factors for evaluating heritage conservation in urban renewal districts. *Habitat International*, 66, 135–148.
- Zhang, C., Fyall, A., & Zheng, Y. (2015). Heritage and tourism conflict within world heritage sites in China: A longitudinal study. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 18(2), 110–136.