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PRECEDENCE OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE AUTHENTICITY OF HOMESTAYS IN GANGTOK: A STUDY ON CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND SUSTAINABILITY ASPECTS

Priyanka Khaling[1], Dr. Jigmie Wanchuk Bhutia[2]
[1]*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Tourism, Sikkim University*
[2]*Associate Professor, Department of Tourism, Sikkim University*

ABSTRACT
Homestay tourism has emerged as an important component of rural and sustainable tourism in India, particularly in culturally rich regions such as Sikkim. Authenticity is considered a key factor influencing tourists' experiences, satisfaction, and perceptions of homestay services. This study examines the precedence of factors that determine the authenticity of homestays in Gangtok, focusing on cultural, economic, and sustainability aspects. Using primary data collected from 176 respondents through a structured questionnaire, the study applies RIDIT (Relative to an Identified Distribution Integral Transformation) analysis to evaluate the relative importance of various authenticity-related factors. The findings indicate that traditional architecture of homestays, local cuisines and culinary practices, and community involvement are the most significant drivers of perceived authenticity. However, challenges such as commercialization, modernization, and standardization threaten the uniqueness of homestay experiences. The study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable tourism and provides policy recommendations for enhancing the authenticity of homestays in Sikkim.
KEYWORDS: *Homestays, Authenticity, Perception, Sustainable Tourism, RIDIT Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Rural India represents a land of deeper-rooted cultural traditions, greater diversities in ways of life, and stronger communal bonds. Recently, promotion of rural tourism has been advocated as a core strategy for sustainable development, improving livelihoods, and cultural preservation by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (Government of India, 2015). Of particular significance in this context is the growth of homestay tourism, which allows community participation and contributes to local economic development (UNWTO, 2018). Also, the integrated tourism and recreation services known as homestays first appeared in Europe during the late 1970s as a different type of vacation, and their introduction in India occurred almost twenty years before that (Wang, 2007). Homestays have gained considerable popularity even in northeastern India, particularly in Sikkim, for their potential for cultural experiences, customized hospitality, and personal interaction with local host communities (Cole, 2007; Bhat & Mishra, 2020). During the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, the principle of sustainable development was emphasized as one that balances economic development with environmental care and cultural preservation. Homestay tourism is in conformity with this paradigm since it emphasizes community participation, cultural sustainability, and environmental friendliness, besides bringing in money to the local people.

Authenticity comes from origin and has been commonly used in museum studies to differentiate the real from the false artefact (Trilling, 1972). In tourism studies, authenticity was first suggested by MacCannell (1973), who assumed that tourists search for authentic experiences that surpass performances staged for spectators. Authenticity is considered one of the main motivators that lead tourists to come to faraway places and experience cultural tourism (Wang, 1999). Terziyska (2012), on the other hand, defined authenticity in terms closely related to the principles of homestay tourism, specifically: "***The factor that expresses the true identity of the host community, while its content and meaning should be properly conveyed to enable tourists to appreciate and respect its value. It also denotes conformity with a community's values, attitudes, and traditions" (Terziyska, 2012, p. 79***).

Homestays offer the ultimate in authenticity for the tourist, as they allow for living among locals, observing everyday life, participating in local cultural rituals, and sharing food. Unlike hotels, homestays offer a form of hospitality which is closely linked to their local cultural context (Rai & Kundu, 2022; Wang, 2007; Cole, 2007).

Sikkim is a small Himalayan state in India that relies substantially on tourism for its economic development. The Sikkim Tourism Policy, 2018, states that the state supports village tourism, homestays, cultural tourism, trekking tourism, eco-tourism, wellness tourism, flora tourism, and adventure tourism (Government of Sikkim 2018). Homestays play an important role in providing income to rural households while concurrently preserving traditional lifestyles and local heritage (Bhutia et. al 2022; Bhat & Mishra 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engeset and Elvekrok (2015) argue that, in the current competitive environment, tourism businesses are using authentic concepts to meet the demand for genuine and organic experiences among tourists. The findings show that the use of

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authentic concepts can enhance the importance tourists place on relevant aspects of their experiences. Whereas Coşkun (2021) states that the conceptualization of authenticity and the authentic experience is a complex process. In the modern, dynamic, and globalizing environment, cultural boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred, resulting in the loss of traditional forms. Power and politics are the key factors in the preservation of heritage and the authentication of authentic experiences. The increasing demand for authentic products and experiences has led to the commoditization of cultural aspects. The study also highlights factors such as globalization, capitalism, standardization, and social media are important determinants of authentic experiences in the tourism context.

According to Atasoy (2021), "the purpose of the host community goes beyond the presentation of their culture, traditions, crafts, and arts to include the preservation and transmission of these values to future generations." The study makes it clear that the call for authenticity continues in the form of souvenirs, ethnic foods, reconstructed histories, and original artworks. It is also asserted that the production of such items may have economic benefits for the host community, but mass production may generate a difference between authentically handcrafted items and inauthentically produced items. It is further stated that when the call for authenticity in tourists' demands is invoked, their expectations may generate consequences of which they are unaware. Therefore, when the preservation of some areas to meet the demands of authenticity is considered, this situation may hinder the development of host communities in tourist destinations. Homestays offer the ultimate in authenticity for the tourist, as they allow for living among locals, observing everyday life, participating in local cultural rituals, and sharing food. Unlike hotels, homestays offer a form of hospitality that is closely linked to their local cultural context (Wang, 2007; Cole, 2007).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Homestays in Sikkim often represent traditional architectural styles, organic agricultural methods, Buddhist and Lepcha cultural heritage, combined with environmentally sustainable lifestyles. These attributes substantially enhance the tourists' perceptions of authenticity and cultural engagement (Government of Sikkim, 2018), and with this view the primary objective of this study has been set to analyze the precedence of factors that determine the authenticity of homestays in Gangtok.

The study areas for this study included 4 beautiful villages of Gangtok. Rumtek, Martam, Rey Mindu and Pastanga.

1. **Rumtek,** situated in proximity to Gangtok within Gangtok, is emerging as a focal point where homestay tourism and farmstay initiatives are increasingly prominent. The homestays in Rumtek manifest a confluence of cultural, natural, and agrarian lifestyle tourism, appealing to visitors who desire proximity to Gangtok and its religious, cultural, and scenic attractions.
2. **Martam Village**, particularly in the Ranka area of Gangtok, about 45 mins away from Gangtok is emerging as a notable homestay destination that accentuates tranquillity, luxuriant landscapes, and cultural immersion. Guests are offered opportunities to engage with local and Bhutia-Nepali culinary traditions, farm produce, village excursions, nature and bird-watching, bonfires and barbecues, as well as meditation practices in the Rumtek Monastery.
3. **Pastanga Village** is very unique, having one of the best sites to witness the splendour of Mt. Kanchendzonga, the third highest in the world, and with the Rumtek monastery atop the hill facing the village, both worth exploring (Demkova et al., 2022). Notably, the inhabitants of the village belong to three ethnic origins—Rai, Bhutia, and Lepcha—with a total of 112 family members and around 500 people. The name Pastanga comes from old terms: "Pa-Sing-Tel" in Kulung refers to the forefathers' wood-collection site, and "Pasing Tengkha" in Bhutia translates to "beneath the bamboo forest." Over time, this has washed off into "Pastanga," hosting three ethnic communities—Rai, Bhutia, and Lepcha. The village is also building silently a new model of homestay tourism anchored at the moment by two homestay properties, one luxury level and one standard (Lama & Manjula, 2014).
4. Rey/Ray Mindu/Mundu is situated at a distance of 21 kilometres from Gangtok, the administrative capital of Sikkim, positioned between the globally recognized monasteries, specifically Rumtek Monastery and Lingdum Monastery, and surrounded by a rich diversity of flora and fauna. According to the 2011 census, the village has a total population of 594 individuals, comprising 121 households. The predominant community inhabiting this region is the Lepcha, with only a small number of Nepalese residents. The designation "Ray" is not the original appellation of this locality; it was previously referred to as "Lyaak Lyang." The term 'Lyaak' translates to "ornaments," while 'Lyang' signifies a "sacred place"(Lepcha & Uprety, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a quantitative, descriptive research design and utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected from 176 respondents through a structured questionnaire administered to tourists staying in homestays across various locations in Gangtok district. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select the respondents based on their availability and willingness to participate. In addition to the primary survey, secondary data were obtained from relevant government reports, tourism policies, and academic literature to support the analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context.

FACTORS IDENTIFIED FROM LITERATURE

The following factors were identified as key determinants of authenticity:

1. **Traditional Architecture & Design (TAD)-** The use of local materials and traditional designs that reflect Sikkimese heritage.
2. **Local Cuisine & Culinary Practices (LCCP)-** Serving organic, home-cooked, and traditional dishes to maintain cultural authenticity.
3. **Engagement Cultural & Host Interaction (CEHI)-** Opportunities for guests to participate in local festivals, rituals, and storytelling.

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4. **Community Involvement (CI)-** Engagement of local artisans, farmers, and guides to sustain the socio-economic fabric of the region.
5. **Environmental Sustainability (ES)-** Adoption of eco-friendly practices such as waste management, rainwater harvesting, and sustainable farming.
6. **Government Regulations & Policies (GRP)-** Impact of tourism policies and incentives on homestay operations.
7. **Modernization vs. Tradition (MT)-** Balancing guest comfort with the preservation of traditional homestay practices
8. **Marketing & Digital Presence (MDP)-** Role of online platforms in shaping guest expectations and perceptions of authenticity.
9. **Economic Viability & Income Diversification (EVID)-** Dependency on homestays as a primary income source versus supplementary earnings.

DATA ANALYSIS

RIDIT (Relative to an Identified Distribution) analysis was used to analyze ordinal data from Likert-scale responses. RIDIT analysis is effective for ranking factors based on their relative importance. The study used RIDIT (Relative to an Identified Distribution Integral Transformation) analysis to assess the perceptions of tourists on the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic aspects of homestays in Gangtok. The study used a seven-point ordinal scale to measure the responses of 176 tourists on nine identified factors. The distribution of responses shows a clear concentration in the higher points of the scale, especially points 6 and 7, indicating a generally positive perception of the homestay experience among the respondents. The lower points of the scale (1 and 2) accounted for a negligible proportion of the responses, indicating little dissatisfaction with the services offered.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
EVID	0	2	18	44	24	56	32	176
CEHI	0	1	12	42	24	69	28	176
ES	1	2	15	39	26	54	39	176
GRP	1	1	11	46	26	58	33	176
MT	1	1	11	49	39	48	27	176
MDP	0	1	7	38	35	68	27	176
TAD	0	0	1	10	17	105	43	176
CI	0	0	2	14	22	97	41	176
LCCP	0	0	2	12	24	98	40	176
Freq	3	8	79	294	237	653	310	1584
1/2 Freq	1.5	4	39.5	147	118.5	326.5	155	
ri	1.5	7	50.5	237	502.5	947.5	1429	
Ri	0.000947	0.004419	0.031881	0.149621	0.317235	0.598169	0.902146	

Figure 1. RIDIT Analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sum	Ranking
EVID	0.0000	0.0001	0.0033	0.0374	0.0433	0.1903	0.1640	0.4383	8
CEHI	0.0000	0.0000	0.0022	0.0357	0.0433	0.2345	0.1435	0.4592	6
ES	0.0000	0.0001	0.0027	0.0332	0.0469	0.1835	0.1999	0.4662	4
GRP	0.0000	0.0000	0.0020	0.0391	0.0469	0.1971	0.1692	0.4543	7
MT	0.0000	0.0000	0.0020	0.0417	0.0703	0.1631	0.1384	0.4155	9
MDP	0.0000	0.0000	0.0013	0.0323	0.0631	0.2311	0.1384	0.4662	5
TAD	0.0000	0.0000	0.0002	0.0085	0.0306	0.3569	0.2204	0.6166	1
CI	0.0000	0.0000	0.0004	0.0119	0.0397	0.3297	0.2102	0.5918	3
LCCP	0.0000	0.0000	0.0004	0.0102	0.0433	0.3331	0.2050	0.5919	2

Figure 2. Results showing the factors' ranking

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RIDIT scores were calculated to provide relative probability estimates, allowing for direct comparison among factors. The RIDIT scores increased monotonically from the lowest category (Ri = 0.000947) to the highest category (Ri = 0.902146), indicating a correct cumulative distribution. The RIDIT scores were then weighted according to the observed frequency of each factor, and the overall RIDIT scores were calculated to assess the relative significance and order of the factors influencing tourist perceptions.

The RIDIT analysis provides a distinct demarcation in the level of importance assigned to the nine dimensions (Figure 1 & Figure 2). The most important dimension was found to be Traditional Architecture and Design (TAD), which received the highest aggregate RIDIT value (0.6166). This was followed by Local Cuisine and Culinary Practices (LCCP) (0.5919) and Community Involvement (CI) (0.5918). At the other end of the spectrum, Modernization versus Tradition (MT) (0.4155) and Economic Viability and Income Diversification (EVID) (0.4383) received relatively lower scores.

Traditional Architecture and Design (TAD) scored the highest among all variables, which means that tourists place a great deal of importance on the maintenance of indigenous architectural designs and elements. Such elements play a significant role in making the homestay experience authentic and, therefore, enhance the value of the homestay experience within the ecotourism context.

Local Cuisine and Culinary Practices (LCCP) also had a significant influence on tourist perceptions. The high RIDIT score indicates that tourists consider organic, home-cooked, and traditional cuisine an essential part of cultural immersion. Culinary authenticity is perceived to serve as a cultural and experiential anchor within the homestay experience.

Community Involvement (CI) came in third, emphasizing the significance of interactions between the host and guest, as well as the involvement of local artisans, farmers, and guides. The involvement of the community is viewed by tourists as an indicator of ecotourism, where economic benefits are shared by the community.

Environmental Sustainability (ES) ranked in a mid-level category, reflecting a moderate to high level of awareness among tourists about environmentally sustainable practices. Factors like waste management, sustainable farming, and water conservation were perceived positively by tourists, although they were less important than cultural experiences.

Marketing and Digital Presence (MDP) also had a moderate RIDIT score, which indicates that online platforms and digital presence are a secondary factor in influencing expectations before travelling. Nonetheless, digital presence does not substitute for cultural authenticity on site.

Cultural Engagement and Host Interaction (CEHI) received a slightly lower rank, suggesting that while participatory cultural engagement is valued, it may not always be the focus of tourists' perceptions of authenticity relative to architectural and culinary aspects.

Government Regulations and Policies (GRP) had a very limited direct impact on tourist perceptions. This can be explained by the fact that the indirectness of policy intervention, as perceived by tourists, is not very visible.

Economic Viability and Income Diversification (EVID) was ranked lower, suggesting that tourists are less concerned with the livelihood structures of the hosts in their evaluation of the authenticity of their experience, even though economic viability is a critical factor for the sustainability of communities.

Lastly, Modernization versus Tradition (MT) had the lowest RIDIT score. This implies that tourists are quite open to modernization, as long as the traditional aspects are not compromised.

Implications of the Study

The results emphasize that the perception of authenticity among tourists in homestay-based ecotourism is largely driven by the cultural manifestations that are tangible in nature, such as traditional architecture and food. Community engagement and environmentally responsible practices add to the overall experience, whereas economic and political considerations have an indirect impact. The findings highlight the importance of homestay stakeholders focusing on cultural preservation, food systems, and community engagement to ensure sustainable and authentic development of ecotourism in the region.

From a policy point of view, the government must make efforts to encourage the adoption of traditional architectural designs in homestays. In addition to that, the government should make efforts to encourage cultural events and festivals in rural areas to boost the cultural significance of rural tourism.

Operationally, homestay owners should focus on cultural storytelling, cultural hospitality practices, and the promotion of local cuisine to enhance the cultural experience of tourists. Marketing strategies should focus on community-based experiences and not on standardized hotel-type services. Furthermore, eco-friendly practices such as waste management, energy conservation, and the use of local materials should be promoted to appeal to environmentally conscious tourists and to aid in the development of responsible tourism practices.

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