

# Authenticity and Commercialisation: A Netnographic Study of Tourist Experiences in Mawlynnong, India

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This study explores the dynamic interplay between authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism, focusing on Mawlynnong, India, acclaimed as Asia's cleanest village. Using a netnographic analysis of 359 TripAdvisor reviews from 2012 to 2024, the research investigates tourists' perceptions of authenticity and commercialisation and develops a framework of authenticity and commercialisation for rural tourism. Positive themes identified include cleanliness, natural beauty, community hospitality, and cultural engagement through homestays. These attributes contribute to the village's appeal as an authentic rural destination. However, tourists also expressed concerns regarding over-commercialisation, including excessive construction, overcrowding, overpricing, and limited local interaction. The study highlights the dual role of commercialisation in enhancing economic development and tourism infrastructure while potentially eroding cultural and experiential authenticity. The research contributes to the theoretical discourse on rural tourism by integrating sustainability into the authenticity-commercialisation framework. Practical implications include the need for destination managers to balance tourism growth with cultural preservation and authenticity.

**Keywords:** rural tourism, tourist experience, commercialisation, authenticity, rural interaction, netnography



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## Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between tourism and its destinations has long been the focus of academic inquiry, especially in its role as a catalyst for rural development (Akay, 2020; Li & Wang, 2023). Within this discourse, authenticity and commercialisation have emerged as pivotal constructs, reflecting the evolving dynamics of tourism and shaping its economic, cul-

tural, and social dimensions (Le et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2021). These themes hold particular significance in rural tourism, a domain celebrated for its potential to foster economic growth, cultural exchange, and heritage preservation while grappling with challenges posed by commodification and commercialisation (Majewski, 2010).

Authenticity is a cornerstone of tourist motivations, particularly in rural and cultural tourism contexts. As MacCannell (1973) introduced in his seminal work on 'staged authenticity,' the pursuit of authenticity shapes how destinations curate and present experiences to meet tourists' expectations. For many travellers, the allure of rural tourism lies in its promise of genuine and unspoiled cultural encounters (Airbnb, 2021).

In rural tourism, authenticity is often experienced through interactions with local communities, participation in traditional practices, and immersion in pristine natural settings (Jyotsna & Maurya, 2019). Visitors seek to escape the artificiality of urban life, embracing the perceived 'real' and 'unchanged' elements of rural destinations. However, this quest for authenticity presents challenges as cultural practices and landscapes adapt to accommodate tourism demands. Recent studies, such as those by Wall and Xie (2002) and Zhao et al. (2024), highlight how the negotiation of authenticity involves stakeholders ranging from local communities to tourists, each shaping and reshaping what is deemed 'genuine.'

Commercialisation plays a dual role in tourism, both as a driver of economic benefits and a potential threat to cultural integrity. On the one hand, it fosters local economies, generates employment, and enhances the visibility of cultural heritage (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Streifeneder et al., 2023). On the other hand, excessive commercialisation risks eroding intrinsic cultural values, leading to homogenisation and a loss of uniqueness (Li, 2003; Sheedy, 2022). Scholars like Cohen (1988) and MacCannell (1973) have highlighted how commodification reduces cultural practices and artefacts to mere marketable commodities, raising concerns about the sustainability of such transformations.

This paradox is particularly evident in rural tourism, where economic reliance on tourism coexists with efforts to preserve traditional lifestyles and socio-cultural dynamics. As Chhabra et al. (2009) argue, tourists' perception of authenticity diminishes when destinations prioritise commercial interests over cultural preservation. Zhang et al. (2021) further elaborate that commercialisation, when thoughtfully managed, can

enhance perceived authenticity and tourist satisfaction (Song et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2019).

Existing literature extensively documents rural tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts, focusing on sustainability and community involvement (Karali et al., 2021; Ruiz-Real et al., 2022). However, research addressing the nuanced interplay between authenticity and commercialisation in rural contexts remains limited, particularly in India. Most studies emphasise developed economies or cultural heritage tourism, leaving rural tourism in developing countries underexplored (Le et al., 2024; Rickly, 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

Additionally, theoretical frameworks on authenticity, such as MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity and Wang's (1999) existential authenticity, have predominantly been applied in urban or heritage tourism contexts. Their relevance to rural tourism, especially in the Global South, requires further exploration. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on rural tourism with a case study of Mawlynong (the cleanest village in Asia). This study employs a netnographic approach to analyse tourists' perceptions as reflected in TripAdvisor reviews. This research explores how tourists perceive authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism destinations. The study seeks to develop a comprehensive framework of authenticity and commercialisation of rural tourism that balances economic growth with cultural preservation. Through its granular analysis of tourists' perceptions, this research contributes to the theoretical discourse on authenticity and commercialisation, offering actionable insights for destination managers and policymakers. These findings have broader implications for developing rural tourism strategies aligned with sustainability and cultural preservation principles, ensuring that destinations retain their unique character while meeting the demands of a globalised tourism market. The study begins with a literature review synthesising existing research on authenticity and commercialisation in tourism, identifying key theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. The methodology section outlines the netnographic approach used to analyse TripAdvisor reviews, detailing the data collection and analysis procedures. The results

and discussion sections present the study's findings, contextualising them within the broader discourse on rural tourism. Finally, the conclusion highlights the study's contributions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

### Literature Review

Authenticity and commercialisation are intertwined constructs significantly influencing tourism development and tourist experiences. The dual pressures of commodification and preservation shape the evolution of rural and cultural tourism landscapes.

#### *Conceptualising Authenticity in Tourism*

Authenticity is a contested concept in tourism studies, often interpreted through varied frameworks. Wall and Xie (2005) emphasise that authenticity is a negotiated construct involving multiple stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, and governing bodies. They propose five dimensions of authenticity: commodification versus spontaneity, cultural evolution versus museumification, economic development versus cultural preservation, ethnic autonomy versus state regulation, and mass tourism development versus sustainable cultural tourism. These dimensions highlight the inherent tensions in authenticity debates. Similar observations are made by Cole (2007) and Yang and Wall (2009), who argue that authenticity often reflects the interplay of tourists' expectations and local adaptations, blending pride with commodified cultural expressions.

Constructive and existential authenticity frameworks further complicate this discourse. Zhang et al. (2021) and Hughes and Carlsen (2010) note that commercialisation when balanced with cultural preservation, can enhance perceived authenticity. Conversely, over-commercialization risks undermining the authenticity tourists seek. Studies by Markwick (2001), Su et al. (2019), and McCartney and Chen (2019) align in emphasising that local adaptations to tourism demands often dilute cultural integrity yet provide economic opportunities that communities cannot ignore.

#### *Commercialisation and its impacts*

Commercialisation is a double-edged sword, driving economic benefits while risking cultural degradation. Several studies highlight these dynamics. For instance, Tang et al. (2019) and Zhao et al. (2024) focus on how over-commercialization at heritage sites diminishes cultural authenticity and compromises visitor experiences. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) argue that the commodification of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) often leads to cultural loss, echoing findings by Song et al. (2021) on the commercialisation of ethnic music in China. In contrast, Prince (2023) and Hughes and Carlsen (2010) demonstrate instances where thoughtfully managed commercialisation can complement cultural preservation. Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2013) reinforce these findings by examining homestay tourism in Thailand, noting that while economic benefits increase, perceived authenticity may decline due to increased dependence on tourism.

#### *Intersections of Authenticity and Commercialisation in Rural Tourism*

Rural tourism presents unique challenges in balancing authenticity and commercialisation. Studies by Zhang and Stewart (2017) and Wall and Xie (2005) show that rural landscapes often face pressures to commercialise, risking the loss of their cultural and environmental integrity. However, Zhao et al. (2024) and Le et al. (2022) argue that rural tourism can thrive by leveraging contextual involvement and existential authenticity to enhance visitor satisfaction. Local communities play a pivotal role in maintaining authenticity amidst commercialisation. Studies by Prince (2023), Wang et al. (2024), and Cole (2007) highlight how communities navigate these dynamics, often redefining their cultural narratives to meet tourist expectations while preserving core elements of their identity. Similar findings by Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2013) and Su et al. (2019) illustrate that active community involvement is key to sustaining authenticity and economic benefits in rural and ethnic tourism contexts.

#### *Tourist Perceptions and Experiences*

Tourist perceptions are central to understanding the interplay between authenticity and commercialisation.

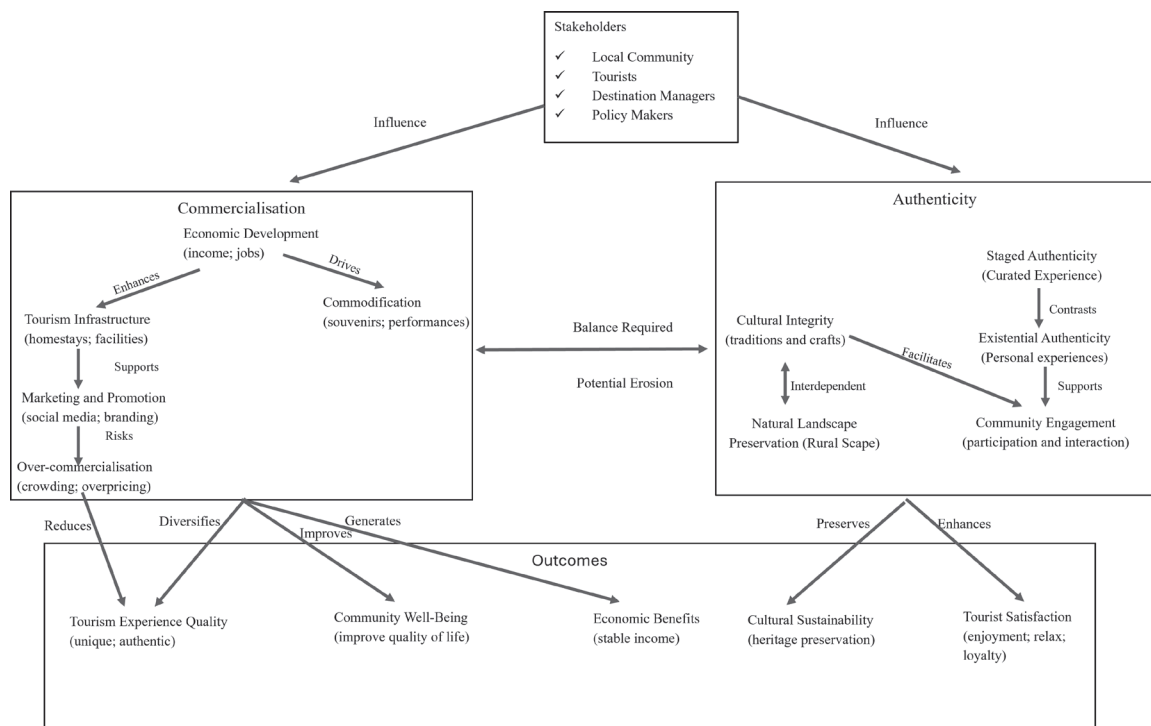


Figure 1 Comprehensive Framework for Authenticity and Commercialisation of Rural Tourism

on. Research by Zhang et al. (2021), Zhao et al. (2024), and Le et al. (2022) underscore the importance of aligning tourist expectations with authentic experiences to ensure satisfaction and loyalty. Tourists often value existential and postmodern authenticity over objective authenticity, prioritising emotional and aesthetic experiences (Song & Yuan, 2021; Yang & Wall, 2009). Song and Yuan (2021) explore how ethnic music commercialisation aligns with tourist expectations, emphasising the dynamic relationship between cultural adaptation and authenticity. Similarly, McCartney and Chen (2019) advocate for co-creation experiences, where tourists and hosts collaboratively shape authentic interactions. These studies collectively highlight the evolving nature of tourist expectations and the challenges of balancing authenticity with commercialisation.

Despite extensive research, several gaps persist. Most studies focus on Western or Asian urban and heritage tourism contexts, with limited attention to rural tourism in non-Western settings. Existing literature often examines authenticity and commercialisation

from stakeholders' perspectives, with fewer studies delving into tourists' perceptions in rural contexts. Additionally, a lack of a comprehensive framework integrating authenticity and commercialisation dimensions limits the applicability of existing findings. Developing a framework specific to the rural tourism context can provide actionable insights for sustainable tourism development.

#### *Framework on Authenticity and Commercialisation of Rural Tourism*

Building upon the above-discussed theoretical underpinnings, this study develops a comprehensive framework to understand the interplay between authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism (Figure 1). The framework integrates the dynamic interplay between authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism, offering a comprehensive understanding of their interdependence. It is grounded in the theoretical constructs of authenticity, including staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) and existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). These concepts

emphasise the balance between curated cultural performances and tourists' pursuit of genuine, emotional connections during their visits (Song & Yuan, 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). In rural settings, authenticity often manifests through immersive experiences, community engagement, and the preservation of natural landscapes (Orden-Mejía et al., 2022; Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021; Su et al., 2019; Wall & Xie, 2005; Zhang et al., 2021).

On the other hand, commercialisation, while driving economic benefits, risks commodifying cultural practices into marketable products, potentially undermining their intrinsic value (Cohen, 1988; Chhabra et al., 2009; Streifeneder et al., 2023). However, when managed thoughtfully, it can enhance tourism infrastructure and accessibility, benefiting tourists and local communities (Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). The framework balances these dual dimensions across five key areas: cultural evolution versus preservation, economic development versus over-commercialization, community engagement versus tourist expectations, environmental sustainability as an authenticity marker, and tourist perceptions of value and authenticity.

The application of the framework in rural tourism highlights the challenges and opportunities of maintaining cultural integrity while benefiting from increased tourism. Tourists praise the village's sustainability and hospitality as authentic markers, yet concerns about overpricing and overcrowding reveal the risks of excessive commercialisation (Chhabra et al., 2009; MacCannell, 1973; Li et al., 2022; Song & Yuan, 2021; Wall & Xie, 2005). By integrating these theoretical constructs, the framework provides a practical tool for destination management, emphasising the importance of balancing sustainability, cultural preservation, and economic viability (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021; Orden-Mejía et al., 2022).

## Research Methodology

### *Netnography*

This study utilises the online ethnography method, netnography (Kozinets, 1998). This study employed a passive 'lurker' methodology, in which the researcher refrained from engaging with the online communities

(Mkono, 2012). Web 2.0 enables consumers to express their candid thoughts and share their personal experiences. The profusion of user-generated material provides an opportunity for academics and marketers to identify patterns in consumer behaviour, consumer experience, beliefs, and expectations and predict future actions (Bartl et al., 2016; Atsız et al., 2022; Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Hernández et al., 2022). With the increasing number of travellers sharing their trip experiences and photos on travel websites, blogs, and social media platforms, netnography in tourism research is gaining popularity (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019; Jyotsna & Maurya, 2019).

### *Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives*

The study is rooted in a constructivist ontological perspective, which posits that social realities are constructed through human interaction and subjective experiences (Burns et al., 2022). The epistemological stance is interpretivist, emphasising understanding tourists' perceptions and experiences through their narratives. These philosophical positions underpin the methodological choice of netnography, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of subjective meanings embedded in online reviews (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023).

### *Area of the Study*

The study has chosen Mawlynnong, a Khasi community village located in the East Khasi highlands of Meghalaya state in India, close to the border with Bangladesh. In 2003, this town was awarded the title of 'cleanest village of Asia' by Discovery India Magazine. This recognition was then confirmed by BBC and National Geographic in 2004 (Shermin, 2017). According to a BBC interview, around 130 years ago, there was a Cholera epidemic in the village (Badal, 2016). Without medical resources, missionaries advised prioritising hygiene as a fundamental measure to fight against the sickness (Badal, 2016). Across the course of history, rural communities have transmitted knowledge regarding cleanliness and its impacts from one generation to the next. After receiving extensive international media attention in 2004, the town attracted attention from the tourism sector. For travellers travelling to the northeastern states of India, it



is strongly advised to include a visit to Mawlynnong. Gradually, the village has emerged as a sought-after tourist spot in North-East India. This hamlet in India is renowned for being a women-led community that has established a matriarchal culture that empowers women. Additionally, it prides itself on achieving a 100% literacy rate.

#### *Data Source and Data Collection*

We have collected data from Tripadvisor.in. This travel website is a significant and unbiased source of both qualitative and quantitative data (Amatulli et al., 2019; Zaman et al., 2016; Atsız et al., 2022; Hernández et al., 2022). To investigate tourists' experiences, this website is acknowledged by worldwide scholars owing to its wealth of information (Chiu & Cho, 2021). Web scraping was used to collect the review data (Ali et al., 2021; Barbierato et al., 2021), extracting review data from multiple sources utilising their origin paths (Khder, 2021). The 'rvest' and 'dplyr' packages in the 'R' programming language facilitated this process. The researchers gathered all 359 review data of 'Mawlynnong Village' as of 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2024. The data of rating (1 – 'Terrible', 2 – 'Poor', 3 – 'Average', 4 – 'Very good' and 5 – 'Excellent'), the month and year, country of tourists belonging, type of travel (in terms of travel companion) and main text review has been stored in an excel file.

#### *Data Analysis Approach*

We carefully read 359 reviews to identify the positive and negative themes. First, after data collection, the reviews with ratings of 1 – 'Terrible', 2 – 'Poor', and 3 – 'Average' have been considered dissatisfied tourist reviews, or they did not like the rural destination. The reviews with ratings of 4 – 'Very good' and 5 – 'Excellent' have been considered satisfied tourist reviews, or they liked the rural destination. From Excel, review data was imported to Word to open coding each review sentence. After reading all reviews, recurring patterns and themes were identified (Naeem et al., 2023). The themes were iteratively refined through cross-verification by the researchers to ensure consistency and accuracy. The manual analysis method gave an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences

that automated techniques might overlook (Garner & Kim, 2022). The process ensured that nuanced details embedded in the narratives were captured and interpreted (Garner & Kim, 2022; Hong, 2020). The researchers maintained a reflexive approach throughout the study, acknowledging their positionality and potential biases. The manual analysis method ensured that interpretations were grounded in the data, reflecting the authentic voices of the reviewers (Garner & Kim, 2022).

### **Results and Findings**

#### *Descriptive Results*

As travel becomes more accessible and individuals search out unique experiences, the small village of Mawlynnong has become a popular tourist destination. We obtained valuable insights into evolving travel patterns by analysing a dataset of 359 reviews collected from the TripAdvisor travel website. We can comprehensively understand tourist characteristics by analysing the distribution of reviews, travel companions, tourists' origins, and seasonal trends.

We found that reviews fluctuate significantly over the year. One review for 2012 and 2014 indicated that social media, the internet, and technology were relatively unexplored earlier. As the pandemic (COVID-19) spread globally, the number of reviews decreased, and signs of recovery appeared in the 2022, 2023, and 2024 data (Figure 2). However, the village did not recover like other destinations regarding the number of reviews given on Tripadvisor websites.

The total number of reviews reveals that most tourists were from India (290 reviews), highlighting the village's popularity among domestic tourists. Nonetheless, the data demonstrate a substantial interest from international tourists (27 reviews). Most reviews from international tourists were from Bangladesh, the USA, Singapore, the UK, Canada, Israel, and Australia. Notably, 40 of them did not mention their country of origin.

When it comes to wandering around Mawlynnong, tourists have a variety of preferences regarding their travel companions. Most tourists travelled with their families, couples travelling together made second in

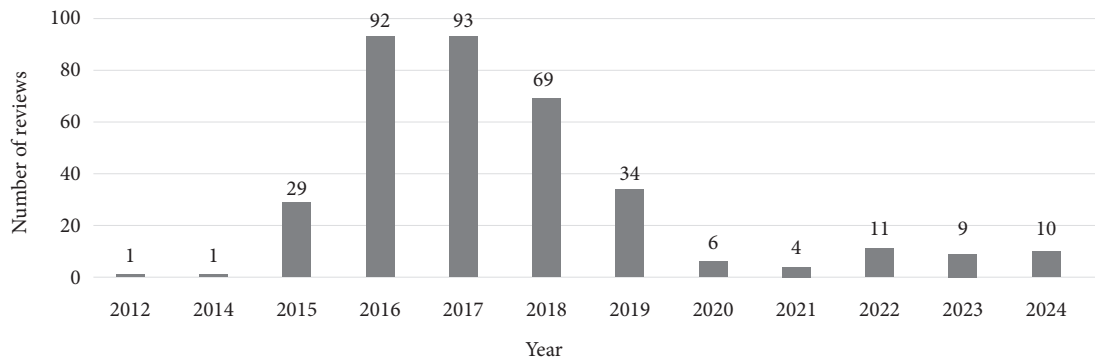


Figure 2 Number of Reviews in Each Year

terms of all tourists, with friends coming in third. A smaller percentage of tourists went on their vacations solo and for business purposes, while a significant percentage did not mention their travel companions.

Tourists are drawn to Mawlynnong all year by its natural beauty, which features several distinct seasonal activities. In the evaluations that we looked at, we found that most of the tourists were during the Winter (November–February) season. After that, they visited during the monsoon season (May–September), followed by the spring season (March–April), and finally, the post-monsoon season (October).

To analyse the satisfaction level expressed in the reviews, we classified tourists with terrible, poor, and average ratings as dissatisfied and those with very

good and excellent ratings as satisfied. The data reveals a gradual increase in dissatisfaction among tourists visiting Mawlynnong Village over the years, with satisfaction declining significantly (Figure 3).

#### Analytical Results

To fulfil the study's objective of exploring tourists' perceptions of authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism, an in-depth analysis of TripAdvisor reviews from 2012 to 2024 was conducted. The thematic analysis identified several key factors, grouped into those contributing to tourists' positive experiences and those leading to dissatisfaction, providing insights into how authenticity and commercialisation are perceived at Mawlynnong.

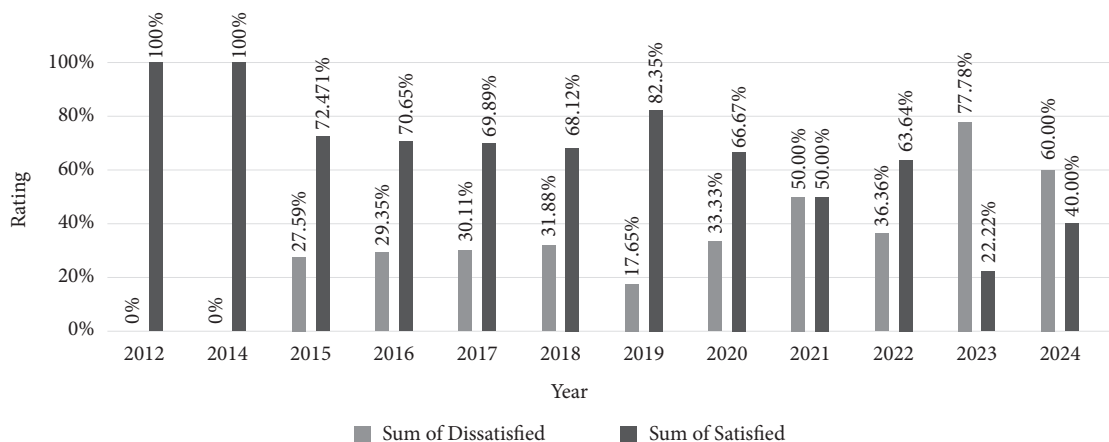


Figure 3 Percentage of Satisfied and Dissatisfied Tourists Over the Years

### Positive perceptions and themes of authenticity

The common positive themes are the cleanliness and sustainability practices in the village, scenic beauty and connection with nature, Community hospitality, and Cultural engagement through homestays.

#### Cleanliness and sustainability

Mawlynnong's reputation as 'Asia's cleanest village' emerged as a central theme. Tourists consistently praised the village's well-maintained streets, abundant greenery, and effective waste management practices, including bamboo dustbins and solar-powered streetlights. These efforts were authentic representations of local commitment to cleanliness and sustainability. Such sustainable practices align with the expectations of rural tourists seeking environmentally conscious destinations. Some representative quotes from tourists' reviews regarding cleanliness included:

The clean village is must stay place to have the experience of staying in proximity to nature, if not for life at least a brief. The greenery is beautifully maintained. It was raining all day during our visit [...]. [A group of friends from Chennai, India in August 2017]

The most beautiful scenic clean village. Fantastic cleanness. Wonder how they managed. People are beautiful and courteous. So is the atmosphere, homes and view. [A couple from Jaipur, India in December 2018]

We enjoyed the walk around the village. Truly clean. It seemed like even children are into keeping it clean – a lesson for just all villages and cities in India. [...] The trees are pruned and paths are well paved. This is a must to get a glimpse of how committed ppl can be towards cleanliness [...]. [A tourist from Pune, India in April 2022]

Everywhere there are baskets made of cane, where one can throw their garbage. All village roads are made of concrete; all the street lights get their source from sun through solar panels [...]. A group of tourists from Odisha, India in May 2017]

I did not find any littering of paper or plastic bags, bottles etc Besides, at every lane and street corner, we found baskets made out of the locally available wooden splints, canes and ropes etc for garbage collection [...]. [A tourist from Hyderabad, India in November 2017]

#### Scenic beauty and connection to nature

The lush greenery, tropical forests, and vibrant flower gardens contributed to tourists' appreciation of Mawlynnong's natural charm. For many visitors, these features represented an authentic rural experience, reinforcing their desire for meaningful interactions with nature. This aligns with rural tourism's fundamental appeal of escaping urban monotony and experiencing the unspoiled beauty of rural life.

The place is full of lush green gardens, beautiful flowers, tropical forest, bamboo houses and one feel as if they are in the nature's lap [...]. [A couple from New Delhi, India in December 2016]

Very clean and neat village. looks very beautiful. So many flowers there. Lovely evening [...]. [A couple from Vadodara, India in January 2023]

#### Community hospitality

The Khasi community's warm hospitality was another theme that contributed to positive experiences. Tourists described locals as welcoming and eager to accommodate visitors, often exceeding expectations to ensure comfort. Such experiences fostered perceptions of a genuine and inclusive rural atmosphere, a key driver of satisfaction in rural tourism.

The way they treat guests is something which someone should experience at least once. [A Family from Vadodara, India in October 2015]

We came for a late-night walk, late means around 9 PM. All shops are in the closing mode, hence no food. Glad we had our dinner on the way, we were looking for some coffee/tea. The first shop near to parking lot was closed, so went ahead for another shop. They almost



closed, but while seeing us, the owner again opened the shop and prepared coffee for us. One of the best cups of coffee, we had during our Meghalaya [...]. [A tourist from Vadodara, India in January 2022]

#### Cultural engagement through homestays

Homestays were frequently highlighted as avenues for authentic cultural exchange, enabling tourists to engage with Khasi traditions, savour local cuisines, and experience the simplicity of bamboo huts. This personalised approach to hospitality created immersive experiences that strengthened perceptions of authenticity. Tourists valued these opportunities for interaction and cultural immersion. Representative quotes from reviews included:

There are lot of homestays available, where you can enjoy staying in a bamboo hut and enjoy some delicious meals made by the owners [...]. [A group of tourists from New Delhi, India in March 2017]

Nice place to stay overnight. Homestays provide basic facilities but received superb hospitality at Kharmawshun Homestay. Do go for a walk in a village. [Another group of tourists from New Bengaluru, India wrote in April 2019]

Every home is a homestay thus lots of options for staying [...]. [A group of tourists from Pune visited Mawlynnong post covid in April 2022]

There are multiple homestays and if you decide to stay in one of them then you will experience awesome serenity and sense of bliss. [Another tourist on 5 May 2022]

#### Negative perceptions and themes of commercialisation

The common themes found in the reviews are Increased construction and homestay in the village, Overcrowding and tourism saturation, Overpricing and commodification, Lack of interaction with locals, and Perceived overhype.

Increased construction and homestay in the village  
A significant theme was tourists' disappointment with perceived over-commercialization. Many visitors felt the village's transformation into a tourism hub had compromised its authenticity. Modern developments, such as increased construction and homestays, were viewed as detracting from the village's original rural charm, making it feel more like a 'showpiece' than a genuine village. Significant statements concerning this included:

Unfortunately, the success of the publicity about the cleanliness has caused a building boom so everything looked like a construction site with heaps of sand and piles of bricks everywhere [...]. [A tourist from UK in March 2018]

Did not extend a natural feel though it was clean. Somehow did not feel like visiting a village. Rather looked like a showpiece. [A tourist's group from Navi Mumbai, India in October 2019]

This is a village which doesn't look like a village. [...] A lot of commercialisation is also seen with every third house offering homestay [...]. [Another tourist from Mumbai, India in March 2023]

#### Overcrowding and tourism saturation

Over-tourism emerged as a critical concern, with visitors expressing dissatisfaction over the influx of tourists that led to overcrowded spaces. Large crowds diminished the tranquil atmosphere many sought in rural destinations, highlighting the challenges of balancing tourism growth with maintaining an authentic rural experience. Significant statements concerning overcrowding included:

I found it to be a bit touristy. [An Australian tourist in November 2016]

It has become like hordes of tourists coming in the village, to practically see nothing. The beauty of the village is being destroyed by the flocks of tourists coming here [...]. [A couple from Bangaluru, India in December 2017]

It claims one of the cleanest villages in Asia. But to my surprise, they have made it very touristy, full of cafes and homestays, looks made up rather than rustic raw natural village [...]. [Another couple from Mumbai, India in March 2023]

#### Overpricing and commodification

Tourists frequently criticised the high costs associated with entry fees, accommodations, and even basic amenities like restrooms. This commodification of the village's offerings led to perceptions that locals were overly focused on monetary gains, further eroding the sense of authenticity. Many felt the value provided did not justify the premium prices charged. Some quotes from tourist reviews mentioning overprice included:

Have stopped for lunch there, which was average and overpriced. [...] Even home stays are very expensive [...]. [A solo traveller from Hyderabad, India in December 2016]

On entry you will be charged INR 100 for car parking or whatever you would like to treat it as. The charges of using toilet are INR 10 which is hugely expensive. if you want to go to relieve your stomach it is INR 20. gosh! [...]. [A Family from Noida, India in April 2017]

They sell basic amenities at premium rates [...]. [A group of friends From Kochi, India in December 2018]

Paying to get access to the village is definitely not worth. Highly disappointed. People are just money minded here everything is overpriced as well. [A tourist mentioned in April 2023]

Overpriced and serving bad quality food, can be skipped. [A tourist from New Delhi, India in March 2018]

#### Lack of interaction with locals

Another recurring theme was the limited interaction between tourists and villagers, especially during day visits. Many visitors noted a lack of opportunities to engage meaningfully with the community, contras-

ting with expectations of immersive cultural exchanges in rural tourism. Such limitations contributed to feelings of detachment and disappointment. Significant reviews concerning this included:

Felt as if all the children, and locals were asked not to interact, or a subtle village code that all seemed to follow, maybe it's the tribal nuance they want to protect and to limit interaction with tourists. [...]. [A tourist from Mumbai, India in December 2021]

Walk around, expect no communication from villagers. [...]. [Another tourist from Mumbai commented in April 2023]

#### Perceived overhype

Several tourists described Mawlynnong as overhyped, suggesting that the marketing of the village had created unrealistic expectations. They found the actual experience underwhelming compared to the idyllic image portrayed in promotional materials, which led to dissatisfaction and a sense of unmet expectations,

[...] but it is overhyped. This place can be skipped as it has nothing new to see [...]. [A tourists visited with friends from Kolkata, India visited in August 2016]

Honestly speaking, this is an overhyped place and for all the wrong reasons. The living root bridge is undoubtedly an incredible thing to see, but then one should visit the double root bridge in Cherrapunji [...]. [A tourist from Kolkata, India in July 2017]

There are much beautiful places in Meghalaya to see than designed and hyped village which only has a bunch of homestays and nothing else. Please do not waste your time. [A couple from Mumbai, India in December 2022]

#### Discussion

The results of this study illuminate the intricate balance between authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism. The analysis of tourists' positive reviews underscores the role of authenticity as a core moti-

vator for rural tourism. Mawlynnong's cleanliness, natural beauty, and hospitable community resonated with tourists seeking an authentic escape from urban monotony. Tourists' appreciation for sustainable practices, including the use of bamboo dustbins and solar lighting, further supports arguments by Zhao et al. (2024) and Le et al. (2022) that contextual involvement enhances perceptions of authenticity.

However, the simultaneous emergence of themes related to commercialisation challenges the perception of authenticity. Many tourists viewed the village as overly curated or 'showpiece-like,' detracting from its rural essence. This critique aligns with the tension identified by Wall and Xie (2005) and Tang et al. (2019) between commodification and cultural preservation. The shift from a functional rural environment to a heavily commercialised tourism hub suggests that an excessive focus on economic gains may erode the genuine experiences tourists seek. The results vividly reflect the duality of commercialisation and its potential to drive economic benefits while risking cultural integrity. Mawlynnong's reliance on tourism has fostered economic growth, as evidenced by the thriving homestay industry and local craft sales. These developments echo findings by Prince (2023), and Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2013) that thoughtfully managed commercialisation can complement cultural preservation.

However, dissatisfaction related to overpricing, overcrowding, and perceived exploitation reveals the darker side of commercialisation. Many tourists criticised the high costs of basic amenities and the overt focus on monetising the destination. This sentiment aligns with Chhabra et al. (2003), who argue that prioritising commercial interests diminishes perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, the findings corroborate Song and Yuan (2021) and Li and Wang (2023), who caution that unchecked commodification often leads to cultural homogenisation and diminished tourist satisfaction. While the results largely reinforce existing frameworks, they also introduce new dimensions to the discourse. One such dimension is the interplay between sustainable practices and perceived authenticity. Mawlynnong's environmental initiatives, such as banning plastic and promoting eco-friendly

infrastructure, emerged as a unique factor in enhancing authenticity. This finding builds on the work of Palacios-Florencio et al. (2021) and Orden-Mejía et al. (2022), suggesting that sustainability can serve as a modern marker of authenticity in rural tourism. Another novel insight is the role of community engagement in shaping tourist perceptions. While tourists praised the hospitality of locals, the lack of meaningful interaction outside of homestay settings was a common critique. This highlights the importance of fostering genuine host-guest interactions, as Kasstenholz et al. (2021) and McCartney and Chen (2019) emphasised. Mawlynnong's model suggests that creating opportunities for cultural exchange beyond commercial transactions could mitigate perceptions of over-commercialisation. The findings reveal that balancing authenticity and commercialisation requires careful planning and management. The criticisms of overhype and overcrowding highlight the challenges of scaling tourism while maintaining its rural charm. This aligns with Marques Santos et al. (2020) and Seraphin and Ivanov (2020), who emphasise the detrimental effects of over-tourism on destination sustainability and visitor experiences.

## Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of authenticity and commercialisation in rural tourism, with Mawlynnong as a case study. By analysing over a decade of tourist reviews, the research shed light on how rural destinations navigate balancing economic development and cultural preservation challenges. The findings reveal that authenticity remains a cornerstone of tourist satisfaction in rural settings. Mawlynnong's well-maintained cleanliness, natural beauty, and hospitable community resonate deeply with visitors seeking an escape from urban life. However, the study also underscores the complex challenges posed by commercialisation. While tourism has significantly contributed to the village's economic prosperity by establishing homestays and improved infrastructure, excessive commercialisation has led to perceptions of overcrowding, overpricing, and diminished cultural authenticity. The research highlights the transformative impact of sustainability initiatives on perceptions

of authenticity. Practices such as banning plastic, promoting eco-friendly infrastructure, and prioritising cleanliness have positioned Mawlynnong as a model for sustainable rural tourism. These initiatives resonate with the evolving expectations of environmentally conscious tourists, aligning economic growth with ecological and cultural sustainability. The findings also caution against over-commercialisation, which risks reducing the village's unique identity to a marketable commodity. Many tourists expressed dissatisfaction with perceived exploitation and the limited opportunity for meaningful interaction with locals. Such concerns underscore the need for thoughtful planning to ensure that tourism development aligns with cultural preservation.

### Implications of the Research

This research contributes to the theoretical discourse on rural tourism by developing a framework by deepens our understanding of the interplay between authenticity and commercialisation (see Figure 1). While prior studies have explored these constructs in urban and heritage tourism, the study contextualises them within a rural setting, offering insights specific to developing economies like India. The findings expand MacCannell's (1973) theory of staged authenticity and Wang's (1999) existential authenticity by incorporating sustainability as a modern dimension of authenticity. The study illustrates how eco-friendly practices and community-led initiatives contribute to the perception of authenticity, suggesting a need to adapt existing frameworks to consider the evolving priorities of contemporary tourists. Additionally, it highlights the dual role of commercialisation as both an economic driver and a potential threat to cultural integrity, reinforcing the need for nuanced approaches in managing rural tourism.

From a managerial perspective, the study provides actionable insights for destination managers, policymakers, and local communities. Destination managers should implement zoning regulations to limit construction and maintain the village's rural character. Enhancing opportunities for authentic cultural exchanges can enrich visitor experiences and foster deeper engagement. Expanding initiatives such as pla-

stic bags and eco-friendly infrastructure can reinforce Mawlynnong's reputation as a sustainable tourism destination. Promoting these practices through targeted marketing can attract environmentally conscious tourists. Addressing tourists' concerns about overpricing is crucial for maintaining satisfaction and loyalty. Establishing standardised pricing for amenities and services can ensure fairness and enhance the destination's value proposition. Implementing visitor management strategies, such as promoting off-season tourism and capping daily tourist numbers, can mitigate overcrowding and preserve the tranquil atmosphere tourists seek. Empowering residents through training programs and participatory decision-making can enhance their role in tourism management, ensuring that economic benefits are equitably distributed while preserving cultural authenticity.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data, specifically TripAdvisor reviews, limits the scope of tourists' self-reported experiences. This approach may introduce biases, as reviews typically reflect extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction, potentially overlooking more nuanced perspectives. Second, the geographic focus on Mawlynnong restricts the generalisability of the findings to other rural tourism contexts. The village's unique attributes, such as its designation as Asia's cleanest village, may not represent broader rural tourism dynamics. Third, the study does not account for the perspectives of local stakeholders, such as residents and policymakers. Understanding their views could provide a more holistic picture of the impact of tourism on authenticity and commercialisation.

Future research should address these limitations by adopting a multi-stakeholder approach. Integrating the perspectives of tourists, local communities, and policymakers can offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. Comparative studies across diverse rural settings can further validate the findings and refine the proposed framework. Additionally, longitudinal research across destinations is needed to explore the long-term impacts of tourism

on rural destinations. Examining how perceptions of authenticity and commercialisation evolve can inform sustainable tourism strategies. Finally, integrating emerging technologies such as sentiment analysis and AI-driven data collection can enhance the depth and accuracy of future research. These tools can capture a broader spectrum of tourist experiences, providing

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