

Producing Authenticity in Restaurant Experiences: Interrelationships between the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*

Truc H. Le, Charles Arcodia, Margarida Abreu Novais, Anna Kralj

Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University, Brisbane-Gold Coast, Australia

Truc H. Le (*corresponding author*)

Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan QLD 4111

Email: truc.le@griffith.edu.au

Charles Arcodia

Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan QLD 4111

Email: c.arcodia@griffith.edu.au

Margarida Abreu Novais

Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan QLD 4111

Email: m.abreunovais@griffith.edu.au

Anna Kralj

Griffith University, Parklands Dr, Southport QLD 4215

Email: a.kralj@griffith.edu.au

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In the context of the advent of the experience economy, conceptualisations of authenticity are often both perplexing and uncertain. This paper argues for a nuanced understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of authenticity of restaurant experiences from the production perspective. It does this by proposing a framework to produce authenticity using the interrelationships of three fundamental elements of a restaurant experience, the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*, and by discussing the consumers' experiential outcomes resulting from such interrelationships. By applying the interrelationships to reconceptualise the existing authenticity approaches in tourism and hospitality contexts, this paper suggests that direct interaction between the provider and the consumer can enhance authenticity of restaurant experiences. As a result, incorporating such direct interaction supports the multi-dimensional approach to authenticity in restaurants. The three outcomes resulting from the interrelationships can further strengthen perceptions of authenticity in restaurant experiences. The paper offers both theoretical and practical insights which advance the production of authenticity in restaurants.

Keywords: Authenticity; Production; Experience Economy; Multi-Dimensionality; Dining Experiences

Introduction

Authenticity has long been recognised as a pertinent issue for marketing and consumer research (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Trilling, 1972). A substantial part of its debate has taken place within the context of tourism, with the topic emerging as a significant theme (Cohen, 1988; Pearce, 2007; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), following MacCannell's (1973, 1976) theorisations on staged authenticity. There have been various conceptualisations of authenticity in tourism with scholars having differing opinions regarding such a rich and diverse concept as authenticity (Belhassen & Caton, 2006; Cohen, 2007). In addition, demand for authenticity has moved beyond just tangible offerings, but to experience offerings and

more importantly, across elements of the economy (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Existing research on authenticity in the marketplace has attempted to establish a distinction between authenticity of business offerings and authenticity associated with individual realisation of the true self (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). It is however vital to bring these authenticity dimensions together whenever it comes to examining experiences as business offerings. This is because an experience is constructed by three key elements: the tangible and intangible product elements, which facilitate the experience; and the human element, whose role is to consume and/or to co-create the experience (Buonincontri et al, 2017).

While there have been several attempts to approach the multi-dimensionality of authenticity in the context of tourism (e.g. Chhabra, 2010; Cohen, 2007; Wang, 1999), such investigation has still been infrequent in the restaurant context, since the majority of authenticity research has focused solely on presenting/selling of the otherness experience (e.g. ethnic culture, cuisine) (Le et al., 2018, 2019). Embracing experiences as business offerings in the restaurant context, Le et al. (2019) propose a multi-dimensional approach to conceptualise authenticity to reflect consumer perceptions, integrating *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* and *Authenticity of the Self* into *Authenticity of the Organisation*. Specifically, from the various lenses used by tourism scholars, authenticity can be perceived either in an object-related or activity-related sense (Wang, 1999), which denotes the stimulation of *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* and *Authenticity of the Self*. From the view of organisational scholars, each restaurant is seen as an 'organisation' or a 'business'; a dining experience that is hosted and offered by the organisation is considered as the output of the business operation (Kovács et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2017). Moreover, Gilmore and Pine (2007), in their discussion of authenticity as the new business imperative, highlight that consumers increasingly seek authenticity through service offerings, as well as through

organisational characteristics that portray the internal organisation and its values, which can be described as *Authenticity of the Organisation*. Henceforth, the consumers not only consume the product, but also consume the organisation's authentic projection (Le et al., 2018, 2019). Research has started to embrace the consumer demand for an organisation's authentic projection and the potential for new business-related cues in constructing authentic restaurant experiences. For instance, Phung et al. (2019) examine the relationship between authenticity perception and brand equity, Kim et al. (2019) suggest ownership type as the antecedent of perceived authenticity, and Luca et al. (2018) focus on the coherence between the restaurant atmosphere and the food on offer.

Despite initial efforts, little research has been conducted to examine if and how the interaction between service providers (restaurateurs) and customers influences authenticity perceptions. This is somewhat contrary to the tourism context in which interaction between tourist and host community is often suggested as the centre of authentic experiences (Brown, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999). There has been an emerging need to develop a more holistic understanding of authenticity in the context of restaurant experiences; one that encompasses not only the core product of the restaurant (the dish), the delivery of cultural and ethnic elements, the customers themselves, the contribution of service provider, but also the interaction between the customer and the service provider (Le et al., 2020). Following this line of argument, how restaurateurs and their interactions with customers can enhance authentic experiences needs to be better understood.

Indeed, although the interaction between service providers and customers has been widely discussed in tourism and hospitality contexts, especially in experience co-creation (e.g. Buonincontri et al., 2017; Mathis et al., 2016; Rihova et al., 2018), the link between such interactions and authenticity has not yet been made clear, nor is it evident how authenticity is

constructed and enhanced in restaurant experiences with the presence of such interactions. Moreover, the majority of existing literature on authenticity in restaurants is consumer-centric whereas the investigation into authenticity from a production perspective is relatively rare with a few exceptions (see Chhabra et al., 2013a, 2013b; Mkono, 2013; Robinson & Clifford, 2007, 2012). Considering the significance of the growing experience economy and the role of service providers in potentially enhancing authentic restaurant experiences, the purpose of this paper is to propose a framework producing authenticity in restaurant experiences using the interrelationships between the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*. To confirm the applicability of the framework, these interrelationships are subsequently applied to reconceptualise existing authenticity approaches in tourism and hospitality contexts. Three consumers' experiential outcomes resulting from these interactions are also discussed and present potential in stimulating and enhancing consumers' authenticity perceptions in the restaurant context.

Producing Authenticity Using Interrelationships of the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*

Considering the increasingly important role of service providers in influencing consumers' authenticity perceptions, this paper proposes a framework for producing authentic restaurant experiences that consists of three elements: the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*. The term 'experience' is used for the restaurant context given that an 'experience' is made up of both tangible and intangible elements that offer a value proposition. The term 'provider' is applied to address the convergence of producer as a product in tourism and hospitality contexts. For example, in the tourism context, a traveller visits a local community and expects to experience the life the locals really live; the authentic life is therefore the 'experience', while the local community is the 'provider' providing/performing that 'experience'. In the

restaurant context, for instance, the 'provider' is the restaurant (or restaurateur), whereas the 'experience' can be the dish, the restaurant theme, the provider (if the provider is also the restaurant theme such as a celebrity chef), or all of the above, which depends on the element that raises consumers' awareness to generate an authenticity perception.

Authenticity in tourism experiences has increasingly focused on existential meanings that tourists assign to such experiences (Bertella, 2015; Bryce et al., 2017; Kirillova et al., 2017b; Veréb & Azevedo, 2019), thus is mainly consumer-focused. This is also in line with Le et al.'s (2019) observation emerging from the authenticity literature in the restaurant domain, that authenticity conceptualisations in tourism and hospitality tend to revolve around consumer-focused dimensions (*Authenticity of the Other/the Thing; Authenticity of the Self*), while neglecting the organisation-focused dimension. This implies authenticity can also be organisationally constructed to induce perceptions of *Authenticity of the Organisation*, which is highly applicable for the restaurant context, where the restaurant is considered as the business - the organisation. This authenticity dimension focuses on the construction of authenticity informed by the qualities and characteristics inherent in the organisation itself that are independent of the customer's subjective opinions and characteristics (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Kovács et al., 2014). This viewpoint therefore aligns with the traditional firm-centric view which emphasises the importance perceived through the internal organisation value chains in rendering offerings that exhibit features valued by the customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Regardless of which meanings or interpretations of authenticity are evoked among consumers, businesses strive to manage these social interpretations and perceptions to protect their positive images, identities and reputations, as such strategies in turn generate values for the businesses (Kovács et al., 2017). The authenticity dimensions emerging from Le et al.'s (2019) study therefore can serve as the outcomes of the three elements

conceptualising authenticity in restaurant experiences: the *Consumer* (inducing *Authenticity of the Self*), the *Provider* (inducing *Authenticity of the Organisation*), and the *Experience* (inducing *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing*).

By proposing the interrelationships between the three elements co-creating an authentic restaurant experience, this paper highlights the crucial role of direct interactions between providers and consumers in enhancing consumers' authenticity perceptions in restaurants. This is often the case in the context of tourism, in which the interaction between tourist and host community is the centre of authentic experience with no or little engagement with an actual product as a toured object (Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999; Xue et al., 2014). However, little has been done to emphasise the interaction of these two elements in the restaurant context (Rachão et al., 2020). As a result, authenticity in restaurant experiences can be examined from a production perspective to address this unbalanced research attention.

This paper therefore conceptualises authenticity of restaurant experiences from the production perspective. Specifically, it looks at the production of authentic restaurant experiences based on the provider's perceived demand for authenticity using the interrelationships of the three elements: the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience* (Figure 1). The interrelationships characterise the need for a pragmatic model that is applicable for understanding authenticity production in the restaurant context, with the aim of triggering and enhancing consumers' authenticity perceptions. To better understand the interrelationships, three guiding questions are proposed; responding to these questions also plays a critical role in confirming the applicability of the interrelationships:

- (1) The *Consumer-Experience*: Does the consumer demand the experience to be authentic?

The question denotes the perceived demand for *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* and/or *Authenticity of the Organisation* from the provider's perspective. This question can be answered by the providers as long as they are aware of what they are selling. For instance, ethnic establishments usually expect their customers to pay attention to the authenticity of the claimed cuisine/theme (*Authenticity of the Other/the Thing*), while other (un-themed) establishments (e.g. café, pub, buffet restaurant) do not. Rather, such establishments seeking to enhance authenticity in this case can expect the customers to seek for an honest reflection of what it is, its identity and values (*Authenticity of the Organisation*). By posing this question, this paper asserts that it is imperative for the provider to understand their consumers' quest for authenticity in order to narrow the perceptual gaps between supply and demand perspectives, given that all authenticity research, at least in the restaurant context, is conducted with the ultimate goal of understanding consumer behaviour (Le et al., 2019).

- (2) The *Provider-Experience*: Does the provider create and design an authentic package of what it says it is, its stories, identity and values when selling its experience?

This question denotes the supply for *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* and/or *Authenticity of the Organisation* once the provider realises which dimension of authenticity is sought after by their consumers. This question is posed in order to fulfil the consumers' quest for authenticity as responded in the first question.

- (3) The *Provider-Consumer*: Does the provider have a direct interaction with the consumer that can potentially prompt existentially meaningful experiences for the consumer?

This question focuses on the direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction since it can potentially enhance the consumer's perceived authenticity. This direct interaction is

added to assist with the production of authenticity, that whether the restaurant experience is more authentic and meaningful when there is a direct interaction between these two elements. This direct interaction can subsequently result in existential authenticity (denotes *Authenticity of the Self*).

<Figure 1 goes here>

Rethinking Conceptualisations of Authenticity in Tourism and Hospitality using the Interrelationships

The proposed framework is now applied to existing theoretical approaches and related concepts of authenticity in tourism and hospitality, in order to validate the interrelationships among the three key elements. Using the three aforementioned questions, the purpose of this application is twofold: firstly, to determine whether the responses to the three questions can capture the multiple worldviews underpinning the theoretical approaches to authenticity; and secondly, to examine the applicability of this framework in the context of tourism and hospitality, and hereby address any gaps overlooked in these authenticity approaches. The existing theoretical approaches to authenticity considered in this paper echo the evolution of the authenticity concept in tourism since MacCannell (1973, 1976) first introduced staged authenticity. The approaches include staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; 1976), phenomenology of tourist experiences (Cohen, 1979), objectivist (Evans-Pritchard, 1987; Wang, 1999), constructivist (Cohen, 2002, 2007; Metro-Roland, 2009), existentialist approaches (Cary, 2004; Kirillova & Lehto, 2015; Rickly-Boyd, 2013; Wang, 1999) and the negotiated approach between the objectivist and existentialist (Belhassen et al., 2008; Chhabra et al., 2013a, 2013b; Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). Postmodernist approaches however are not included in this framework as they suggest the

abandonment of the authenticity concept altogether, which has been criticised as a 'premature' and an 'oversimplification' (Mkono, 2012, p. 480, 483). The demand for authenticity is still relevant to some tourists (Belhassen & Caton, 2006), thus the production of authenticity is still germane to scholarship.

In response to the three aforementioned questions, Figure 2 presents the application of the interrelationships to the existing conceptualisations of authenticity. The discussion of how the reconceptualisation has taken place in each approach is demonstrated below. By responding to these three questions, each authenticity approach is reconsidered and viewed in relation to the interactions between the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience*.

<Figure 2 goes here>

Staged Authenticity

In explaining staged authenticity, MacCannell (1973, 1976) proposed that contemporary tourists search for pilgrimage-type travel which allows them to escape their usual mundane daily life and to search for the 'real life' of others. Thus, it responds "yes" to the *Consumer-Experience* inquiry (Figure 2a). Pejoratively though, MacCannell used the term 'tourist' overwhelmingly as a label for someone who seemingly enjoys inauthentic experiences, indicating that the inauthentic experience is frontstage and the real life of others when there are no tourists around is actually happening backstage (a "no" for *Provider-Experience*). With staged authenticity, *Authenticity of the Organisation* converges with *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* since the authentic life of others indeed reflects the others' stories, identity, and values. Staged authenticity still portrays a direct interaction between the local community (the others) and the tourists. MacCannell in his thesis however did not discuss the meanings

of such interaction, which may allow the tourist to achieve an existential state of being (a “no” for *Provider-Consumer*).

Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences

Phenomenology of tourist experiences (Figure 2b) advocates the heterogeneity in tourists’ authenticity demand (Cohen, 1979). In contrast with staged authenticity, Cohen (1979) argues it is oversimplified to accept MacCannell’s discourse on contemporary tourists, who seek the authentic lives of others but are simultaneously deceived by manufactured staged experiences. Phenomenology of tourist experiences was conceptualised supporting the notion that ‘tourist’ does not exist as one type because people are motivated to travel in search of different experiences, and the level of authenticity demand is therefore different. It is important to note however, no demand for authenticity does not warrant the tourists’ unawareness of inauthenticity, rather, it simply means there is little concern for authenticity, even if it is a staged tourist space (Cohen, 1988). As a result, the demand for authentic experience depends largely on the type of tourists who experiences it (e.g. “yes” for *Consumer-Experience* in the ‘experimental’ and ‘existential’ mode; “no” for the ‘recreational’ and ‘diversionary’ mode). The typology of modes of tourist experiences also emphasises the tourist’s meaningful engagement in the authentic life of others that can prompt the existential state of being (i.e. the ‘experimental’ and ‘existential’ mode) (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*).

For instance, the ‘experimental’ mode characterises the type of tourists who refuses completely to commit oneself to the authentic life of others but samples and contrasts different alternatives (Cohen, 1979). To do this, they must spend time and effort understanding the life of others. Undoubtedly, the engagement/interaction between the

others and the tourists is in accordance with the level of awareness of the travellers in terms of what they want to achieve and the commitment to 'go native' to the 'world' of the others. The inquiry of the *Provider-Consumer* in the phenomenology of tourist experiences henceforth varies from "no" to "yes" depending on the sophistication of the tourist's engagement and the level of willingness to submit oneself to the authentic life of others. The inquiry of *Provider-Experience* also ranges from "yes" to "no" depending on the provision of authenticity if the provider perceives a demand for authentic experiences (i.e. 'experimental' and 'existential' mode). Cohen's phenomenology of tourist experiences appears to be an inclusive approach to authenticity since it projects the heterogeneity of tourist needs and motivations, thus converges with the majority of theoretical approaches to authenticity in tourism and hospitality.

Objectivist/Constructivist Approach

Wang (1999) noted objectivist and constructivist approaches to authenticity (Figure 2c) are conceptualised as object-related authenticity as there is a demand for the toured object/experience to be authentic (a "yes" for *Consumer-Experience*). As such, the object/experience is produced as authentic (a "yes" for *Provider-Experience*) either based on an absolute and objective criterion used to measure authenticity (objectivist approach) (Evans-Pritchard, 1987; Wang, 1999) or as the outcome of the construction regarding points of view, beliefs, powers, stereotyped images, or expectations (constructivist approach) (Littrell et al, 1993; Pearce & Moscardo, 1985; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). The authenticity recognition of these object-related approaches, as the name suggests, is object/experience-focused, and does not necessarily involve direct *Provider-Consumer* interactions to achieve existentially authentic experiences (a "no" for *Provider-Consumer*).

Existentialist Approach

As the existentialists de-emphasise the role of object-related authenticity, the consumer does not seek authenticity of the object/experience (a “no” for *Consumer-Experience*) (Figure 2d).

As a result, the provider does not need to produce authenticity in the objectivist sense to cater for this demand (a “yes” or “no” for *Provider-Experience*). However, the existentialist approach considers the tourist’s intersubjective feelings created by the meaningful collective participation in tourism (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*) (Wang, 1999). The consumer’s experiential outcomes resulting from the direct interaction with the provider and include the realisation of true self, the connectedness with other tourists, the liminal engagement and the sense of belonging with the local community members (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015; Rickly-Boyd, 2012, 2013; Wang, 1999). Further, the experience itself can also be a catalyst for the realisation of true self (i.e. tourism as a catalyst for the existential state of being in Brown, 2013) without any direct *Provider-Consumer* interactions (a “no” for *Provider-Consumer*). The direct interaction between providers and consumers as a result is not necessarily present in existential authenticity in tourism and hospitality contexts.

Objectivist & Existentialist Approaches

There are two negotiated versions between the objectivist and existentialist (i.e. theoplacity and performative authenticity) which encompass all characteristics of the two streams (Figure 2e). Specifically, the concept of theoplacity, first proposed by Belhassen et al. (2008), is defined as existential authentic experiences as the outcome of the tourist’s actions and socially constructed expectations about the place visited (a “yes” for *Consumer-Experience*), while also taking into account the tourists’ own direct, empirical encounters. Theoplacity is created via the process of forming authenticity of the self in the presence of authenticity of

material things/toured objects (Jones, 2010) (a “yes” for *Provider-Experience*). This process, however, does not necessarily require the direct interaction between the provider and the tourist to achieve existentially authentic experiences (a “no” for *Provider-Consumer*). On the other hand, in the other transitional version (performative authenticity) proposed by Knudsen and Waade (2010), there is a shift towards sincerity as a negotiated value and collaboration between local members and tourists (Taylor, 2001) (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*). As a result, the inquiry into the direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction in the negotiated approach can either yield “yes” or “no” responses.

One key conclusion derived from the negotiated approach (Figure 2e) is that the consumer in tourism and hospitality contexts can still perceive authentic experiences even without the direct (and existentially meaningful) interaction with the provider. Adding the direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction to the production of authenticity in restaurant experiences is argued to enhance existential authenticity (Figures 2d and 2e). Examining authenticity from the existentialist approach (as well as the negotiated) has still been relatively scarce in restaurant research (Le et al., 2019), even though the interaction between tourist and host community is often the centre of authentic tourist experience. Efforts have been made to enhance the applicability of this negotiated approach in the restaurant context (Chhabra et al., 2013a, 2013b; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). Nevertheless, these studies have still been consumer-centric and lack attention to the provider, who has indeed ‘initiated’ the consumption of tourism and hospitality experiences. This paper therefore addresses this gap by assuming a provider perspective to understand the production of authenticity in restaurant experiences. In doing so it emphasises the significance of direct interaction between the provider and the consumer in constructing and enhancing consumers’ perceptions of authenticity. The above

discussion has shown that the interrelationships are deemed applicable to capture inclusively the authenticity conceptualisations in the tourism and hospitality context.

Applying the Interrelationships to Real-World Settings

The applicability of the proposed framework can also be demonstrated through real-life examples reflecting the aforementioned conceptualisations of authenticity in tourism and hospitality. In the tourism context for instance, a tourist visits an exhibition in Paris in order to interact with a famous painter or writer as well as to consume/experience his or her works at the exhibition. Given that the tourist may have been exposed to his or her works several times before (a “no” for *Consumer-Experience*), expected meaningful interaction with the painter or writer (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*), would be more authentic than direct exposure to his or her works in situ (the work however is still objectively authentic because it is a true output of the painter, thus a “yes” for *Provider-Experience*). This is because the tourist is not concerned (or is barely concerned) about authenticity of the paintings; however this does not denote (s)he is not aware of it (Cohen, 1988). The existentialist approach (Figure 2d) therefore is applicable in this scenario as the authenticity achieved focuses on the direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction as a catalyst for the existential state of being, not necessarily because the tourist experiences the painter’s authentic works. In the case that the interaction with the painter is authentic (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*) but the painter’s works are not authentic (a “no” for *Provider-Experience*), the existentialist approach (Figure 2d) is still applicable considering the trigger point for existential authenticity here lies upon the direct meaningful interaction with the painter. However, if the tourist indeed demands the paintings to be authentic (a “yes” for *Consumer-Experience*) and both the interaction with the painter and the painter’s works are all authentic (a “yes” for both *Provider-Consumer* and *Provider-*

Experience), the negotiated approach (Figure 2e) is deemed more applicable than the existentialist. As a result, the key difference between Figures 2d and 2e is the response to the *Consumer-Experience* inquiry (“Does the consumer demand the experience to be authentic?”).

Often, interaction between tourist and host community (the provider) is the centre of authentic experience in the context of tourism with no or little engagement with an actual product as a toured object; Figures 2d or 2e can still be applicable to understand the role of direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction in constructing authentic experiences. In particular, if the tourist demands an authentic experience (i.e. authentic life of the host community), the authenticity perceived will be an amalgam of the host community’s authentic life (objectivist) and a sense of *communitas* (existentialist) resulting from the interaction with the host community (Wang, 1999) (Figure 2e). If the tourist does not seek to experience the host community’s authentic life, (s)he can still perceive a sense of *communitas* resulting from the interaction with the host community, which makes the experience authentic from the existentialist approach (Figure 2d). The interaction in both cases also becomes a part of the experience in conjunction with the authentic life of others.

In the restaurant context for example, when a customer decides to experience a meal in Jamie Oliver's restaurant in London, the consumer expects not only to interact with Jamie Oliver but also to experience his dish made from his recipe and philosophy (a “yes” for *Consumer-Experience*). In this case, the experience is authentic from the objectivist approach because the setting is 'Jamie Oliver' (denotes *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing*) and the dish is an amalgam of Jamie's recipe, philosophy and personality (denotes *Authenticity of the Organisation*) and a “yes” for *Provider-Experience*. However, it is a “no” for *Provider-Consumer* because it is impossible to have a direct interaction with Jamie; the customer in this

case only consumes 'the Jamie Oliver' setting in Jamie's restaurant. 'The Jamie Oliver' setting is seen as one of the product elements in the restaurant (apart from his dishes) thus the term 'experience' works best to indicate the overarching quality of the offering. In this scenario, it can be seen that *Authenticity of the Organisation* converges with *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing* because Jamie Oliver is both a provider and an experience/product, thus it is best suited Figure 2c.

On the other hand, if there is a direct interaction between Jamie Oliver and the customer because Jamie Oliver is present three days per week (e.g. that is his flagship restaurant), the perception of authenticity can be significantly enhanced because the customer not only perceives an existential state of being (i.e. fulfilling the quest of meeting Jamie in person) (a "yes" for *Provider-Consumer*) but also consumes an authentic projection of the restaurant (i.e. Jamie's recipe, philosophy, and others through the dishes and the setting) (a "yes" for both *Consumer-Experience* and *Provider-Experience*). As a result, the negotiated version between objectivist and existentialist approaches (Figure 2e) is most applicable in this scenario.

However, if that customer decides to experience a replica of Jamie Oliver's meal in a local eatery in London because of its affordability (a "no" for *Consumer-Experience*), this either signifies a "no" for *Provider-Experience* in an objectively authentic Other sense, or a "yes" for *Provider-Experience* because this replica establishment stays true to its identity and stories (i.e. it says outright that the recipes replicates Jamie Oliver's recipes in his cookbooks). That customer therefore does not have a direct interaction with Jamie because the restaurant is not owned or founded by Jamie Oliver (a "no" for *Provider-Consumer*). The dining experience (a replica of Jamie Oliver's dish) however can still be authentic from the existentialist approach (Figure 2d), as far as the customer realises the true self. This is seen as an example of the experience itself as a catalyst for the existential state of being (Brown, 2013).

Potential Outcomes from the Interrelationships

Responding “yes” to all the three questions is considered the most desirable and inclusive form of producing authenticity in tourism and hospitality contexts. This form is illustrated in Figures 2b and 2e of the interrelationships. In the phenomenology of tourist experiences (Figure 2b), this desirable form can be seen as a reflection of the provider being able to accommodate the quest for authenticity among tourists with the ‘existential’ mode (Cohen, 1988). For example, a traveller visits a local town her/himself and expects to see the authentic life of the locals (a “yes” for *Consumer-Experience*). The local community welcomes and engages the traveller in their everyday life, thus (s)he can experience the authentic life of others (a “yes” for *Provider-Experience*). The meaningful engagement with the locals in everyday life (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*) allows the traveller to realise the true-self that has long been overlooked in her/his mundane life.

In the negotiated version between objectivist and existentialist approaches (Figure 2e), this ideal form can be seen as a reflection of the restaurateur being able to project their true identity and values while selling their offerings in an ethnic setting. For instance, a customer dines in a Malaysian restaurant and expects it to be authentically Malay (a “yes” for *Consumer-Experience*). The restaurant prides itself as authentically Malay (a “yes” for *Provider-Experience* in an objectively authentic Other sense), and further strives to portray its identity and values as a family-owned restaurant and treats every customer like a family member (a “yes” for *Provider-Experience* in an *Authenticity of the Organisation* sense). The restaurateur always interacts with the customers (a “yes” for *Provider-Consumer*) and makes them feel like they belong to a family (the direct *Provider-Consumer* interaction as a catalyst for the existential state of being). The dish itself is authentically Malay and provokes a sense of nostalgia among the customer (the experience of the dish as a catalyst for the existential

state of being). As a result, any set of production practices that responds “yes” to all the three questions in Figure 1 can potentially trigger three outcomes in consumers’ experiences (Figure 3) that further enhance their perceptions of authenticity:

- (1) The *Consumer-Experience*: The consumer consumes or transforms the self through the experience.
- (2) The *Provider-Experience*: The consumer believes the experience reflects the provider’s identity and values.
- (3) The *Provider-Consumer*: The consumer feels their values align with the provider’s.

<Figure 3 goes here>

Consuming/Transforming the Self through the Experience

This outcome emerges when the *Consumer* demands authenticity of the *Experience* in restaurants. Longing for less contrived, less commoditised and more personal encounters that remain untouched by commerce, consumers are likely to relate the consumption experience to what they once did for themselves, and more of what they have never experienced (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This notion associates the consumer’s self-conforming, hence, as soon as the consumer realises a self-more aligned with who (s)he wants to be (Canavan, 2017), the more personal and authentic the experience becomes. For instance, niche products or ingredients are used to achieve social visibility and to serve the desire for conspicuous consumption and to fulfil social needs due to their distinguished features and values (Rao & Schaefer, 2013). This calls for greater attention to the shift from the provider’s sole profitability motives to the consumer’s self-defining pursuits (Canavan, 2017), by that on one hand, the provider can still meet demand in a commercial sale while maintaining the

moneymaking interest, on the other hand, the consumer feels less 'sold' or manipulated (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 13).

Perceived authenticity in restaurant experiences has been generated through the consumer's construction of self-image and realisation of their own identity, in which the provider lets the consumer (or lets them think they do) define and create their own experience. The experience can either be memorable for consumers, which engages them in an inherently individualised way (Ingerson & Kim, 2016; Rickly & McCabe, 2017), or effectual, which can guide them to change some dimension of self (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Both ways create an existential state of being for the consumer that reminds or transforms them to a more aligned self with who one wants to be, or used to be in the past but eventually become alienated from due to practical reasons (Cohen, 1979; Xue et al., 2014). This state of being can play a central role in driving positive, rich emotional engagement and memorability of the consumption (Rickly & McCabe, 2017; Rickly & Vidon, 2017).

By integrating direct consumer involvement in creating a unique experience, deeper insights into the consumer's personal preferences and ultimately to a keener sense of self will thereby be warranted. This active engagement from the consumer is also considered as a key element of experience co-creation (see Buonincontri et al., 2017; Mathis et al., 2016; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Rihova et al., 2018). Furthermore, Grauel (2016) argues that through food consumption, consumers present the true self, or practise negotiation between consuming the practicality of food and compromising the true self. This authenticity insight emerging from the *Consumer-Experience* interaction therefore focuses on the consumer's recognition of a lived-in self that closely resembles their own self-image, or a transformative and more relevant self with whom one wants to be (*Authenticity of the Self*), which can be stimulated by the consumer's demand to consume an authentic experience. Taking Brown's

(2013) notion of tourism as a catalyst for existential authenticity as a starting point, this paper extends the argument that the interaction between the *Consumer* and *Experience* acts as a catalyst for existential authenticity. Perceiving *Authenticity of the Self*, more significantly, is not only important for enhancing the overall authenticity of the experience but also beneficial for enhancing the consumer's well-being (Canavan, 2017; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

The Consumer Believes the Experience Reflects the Provider's Identity and Values

This outcome results from the inquiry into the *Provider-Experience* relationship. Applying the two standards of authenticity proposed by Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 97): 'being true to itself' and 'being what it says it is' to anthropomorphise business offerings, any offering can, thereby, be true (or not) to the business that produces it, and that offering can be (or not) what the business says it is. Moreso, whether an experience is authentic or not is not only an objective or a socially constructed object-based matter, but also when it renders distinctive features that truly reflect its provider – the restaurant. Carroll and Wheaton (2009) assert that from the consumer viewpoint, authenticity is projected most clearly and saliently from the provider, whose embedded structure and values are attested publicly in a visible and central way. Restaurateurs, therefore, could adopt strategies that emphasise their identities and values most strongly, and one of the most powerful ways is projecting these core components when selling their dining experiences (O'Connor et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, it needs to be ensured that the strong emphasis on the core components of the provider does not go against the experience attributes that are portrayed to the consumers, which otherwise, can expose the provider to greater risks and liability (Demetry, 2019; Kovács et al., 2017). As a result, it is important to find ways in which the experience can reflect the provider in order to be considered as being true to the one providing/producing it.

Restaurants accordingly can attach features reflecting the internal values to the experience, such as elements in quality enhancement, skilled craftsmanship, and commitment to sustainability, to influence consumers' authenticity perceptions (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This rendering tactic, however, needs to be aligned with the restaurant's public image, thus suggests the bidirectional effect from both elements. On one hand, the provider will be authentic to the extent that it characterises their identity and values (*Authenticity of the Organisation*), and this also influences consumers' perceptions of authenticity of the experience (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). On the other hand, the perceived authenticity of the experience can also be stimulated if certain features reflecting the provider's true identity and values are visibly embedded in the experience itself. For example, a restaurant that claims to value sustainability and moral practices can enhance their business' perceived authenticity by featuring and offering food sourced only from producers treating their animals ethically or growing their crops in an environmental-friendly way. The principle behind such attribution is that the food experience being consumed by the customer must reflect those features, which are believed to shape the business' identity and values, so as to reduce the risks and liability the business faces if the claims do not accord with the experience offering.

Value Alignment between the Consumer and the Provider

This outcome is stimulated from the response to the *Provider-Consumer* inquiry. As authenticity can also deliver what the restaurant stands for and convey its identity and core values (*Authenticity of the Organisation*), a consumer can recognise and perceive accurately this set of values and identity if the development and communication of business core components is effective (Modella, 2010). As soon as the restaurant's identity and values are recognised, the consumer may realise their personal values converge with the restaurant's

values to a certain extent. This realisation in value alignment subsequently reinforces the consumer's brand loyalty and attachment since it triggers a sense of connectedness and communal belonging (Cary, 2004), and thus enhances a sense of attachment and trustworthiness towards the restaurant's brand (Le et al., 2020). This self-realisation can be considered as one form of existential authenticity and supports the notion that existential authenticity does not just happen to tourists on holidays, but within restaurant settings that can foster temporary growth in existential authenticity via particular mechanisms (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015).

Camilleri (2008) asserts that making business actions transparent, communicating clearly and accurately the business values, and promoting moral practices to make the business brand a good citizen are essential tactics to induce the socially constructed perceived *Authenticity of the Organisation*. Such actions can stimulate the long-lasting trust relationships among consumers in food establishments. This outcome resulting from the *Provider-Consumer* relationship somewhat reflects the existentialist approach of authenticity in the tourism context, particularly inter-personal existential authenticity (Wang, 1999), which considers an existentially authentic tourism experience as a result of collectively producing and experiencing the touristic journey, where people get together in a mutual production to share a feeling of closeness or solidarity. This outcome can further contribute significantly to the well-being and sustainability of the restaurant business and its brand, by enhancing the connectedness, sense of attachment and thus trustworthiness among the consumers (Canavan, 2017).

Conclusion and Implications

Given the increasingly important role of the provider in influencing consumers' authenticity perceptions in the restaurant context, further investigation into authenticity from a provider perspective is required to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of producing authenticity in restaurant experiences. Restaurants would benefit from direct *Provider-Consumer* interactions which enhance authentic experiences and in turn generate value for their businesses. While the role of the provider has been undermined in authenticity in restaurant experiences, this paper has pointed out the provider still offers substantial contributions to the overall construction of an authentic experience. It is best to conceptualise authenticity in a way that yields more attention to the provider, given that during the experience consumption, consumers also value authenticity portrayed via the characteristics reflecting the business (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). This notion emphasises the vitality of *Authenticity of the Organisation* in the construction of authenticity perceived by consumers (Le et al., 2019).

This paper therefore argues for the importance of understanding authenticity in the context of restaurant experiences from a production perspective. In this way, it proposes a framework featuring the intrinsic interrelationships between the *Consumer*, the *Provider*, and the *Experience* in producing authentic restaurant experiences. By adding the direct interaction between the provider and the consumer, this framework facilitates the production of authenticity by determining if the restaurant experience is more authentic and meaningful when there is a direct interaction between these two actors, which can subsequently result in existential authenticity. The proposed framework also emphasises the increasing significance of approaching the multi-dimensionality of authenticity to capture the comprehensive understanding of authenticity production in restaurants, by posing the three questions

encompassing the three dimensions of authenticity: *Authenticity of the Other/the Thing*, *Authenticity of the Organisation*, and *Authenticity of the Self* (Le et al., 2019). The framework, therefore, is useful for service providers to comprehend the production of different dimensions of authenticity in restaurant experiences.

In addition, the proposed interrelationships appear to be one of the first frameworks that can capture inclusively authenticity approaches and related concepts in tourism and hospitality contexts, thus aiding the conceptualisation of authenticity's multi-dimensionality. Apart from the restaurant context, this framework can be adapted to examine the production of authenticity in other hospitality and tourism contexts (e.g. Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019 examining the production of authentic souvenirs in heritage destinations), in which the attention to 'the product as the experience' (the experience economy) is embraced among businesses and organisations. Future empirical research can hence apply this framework to investigate authenticity production in restaurant experiences and provide empirical insights into the wider hospitality and tourism context.

This paper has several practical implications. Firstly, the paper calls for a greater attention to direct and existentially meaningful interactions with consumers among restaurateurs to enhance consumers' authentic experiences. The reconceptualisation of authenticity in tourism and hospitality using the proposed framework indicates that consumers can still perceive authentic experiences even without direct interactions with the provider, which may undermine the significant influence of direct *Provider-Consumer* interactions on authentic restaurant experiences. Restaurateurs therefore can utilise this tactic more effectively to create more meaningful interactions with their customers, and thereby enhancing customers' perceptions of authenticity from the existentialist approach. This subsequently leads to increased memorability of the experiences and thus motivates dining retention and loyalty.

Secondly, the proposed framework also depicts three consumers' experiential outcomes resulting from the production of authentic restaurant experiences (Figure 3). These outcomes contribute to the comprehensive understanding of various mechanisms and tactics to cater and stimulate consumers' authenticity perceptions in restaurant experiences. Moreso, authenticity has increasingly been imperative for restaurants because consumers assign higher value to authentic products and authentic businesses (Kovács et al., 2014). Learning to understand, manage and excel at rendering authenticity henceforth have become primary strategic tactics to manage consumers' perceptions of authenticity, which in turn offer differentiation and establishes competitive advantage for businesses (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

These three outcomes for consumers offer several examples and implications not only for restaurateurs but also business practitioners, who are keen on producing authenticity through their products, services, experiences and organisations, and on managing and enhancing consumers' subjective authenticity perceptions via several strategies that can be controlled by the businesses. Future research can conduct investigations into how service providers use specific mechanisms for producing, triggering and manipulating consumers' perceptions of authenticity in restaurant experiences based on the three consumers' experiential outcomes suggested in this paper, and into how these strategies can be used and adapted in different contexts.

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Figures

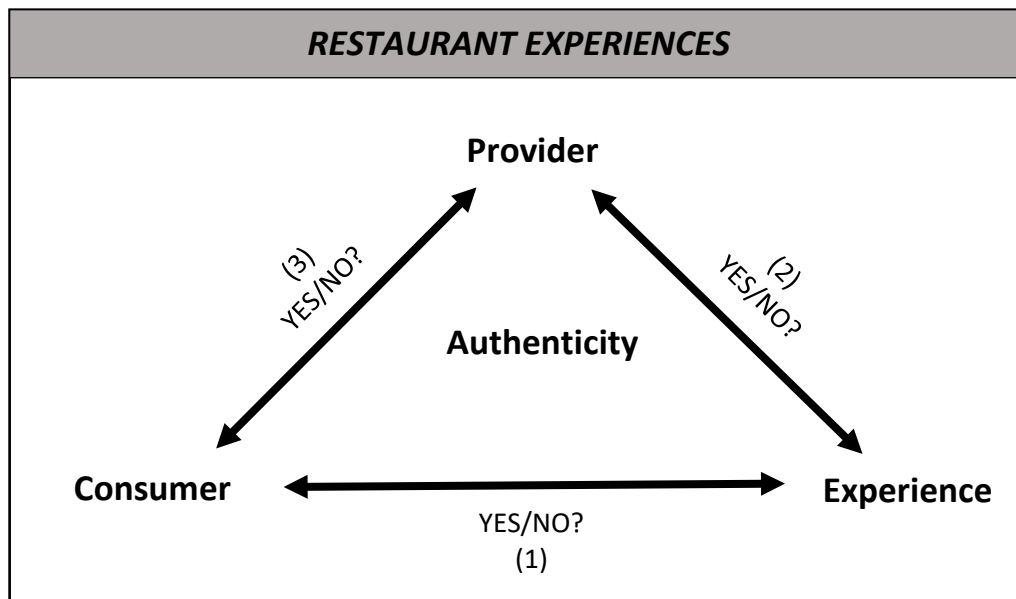


Figure 1. Production of authentic experiences using the interrelationships

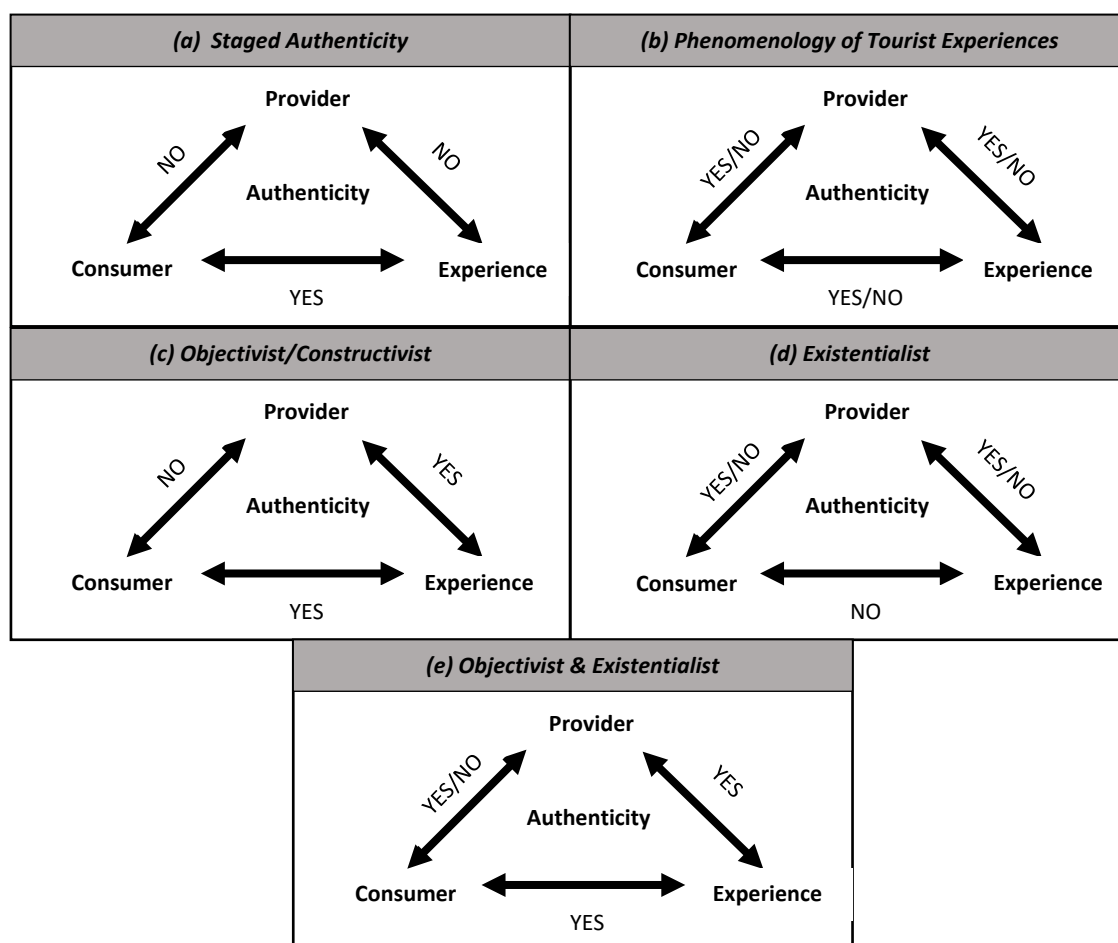


Figure 2. Re-conceptualisation of authenticity in tourism and hospitality using the interrelationships

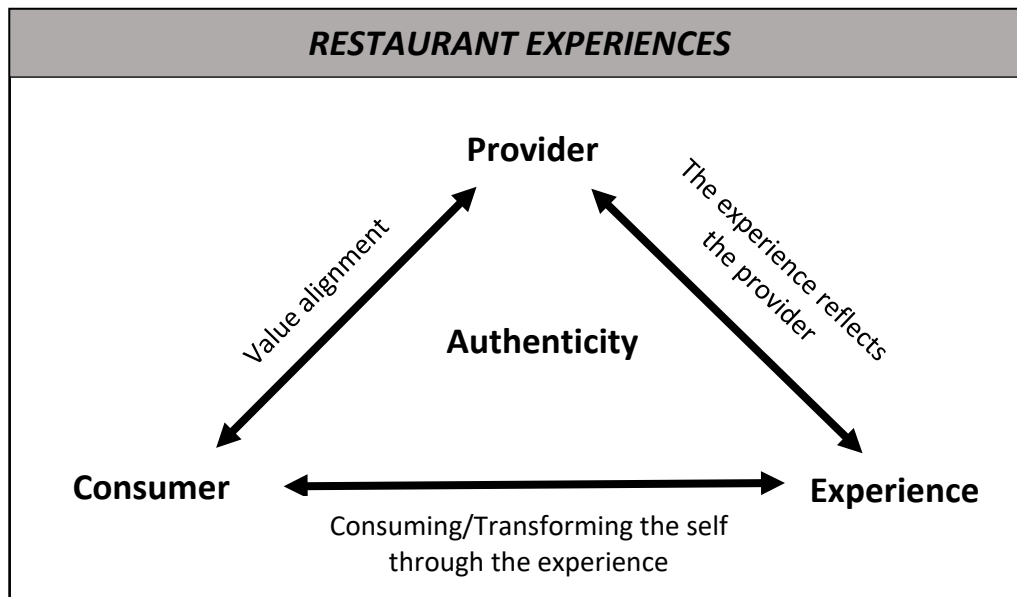


Figure 3. Potential outcomes resulting from the production of authentic experiences