

Commodification and Perceived Authenticity in Commercial Homes

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Abstract: Commercial homes represent the commodification of a rural home that affects its authenticity. This study uses a quantitative approach to examine the interaction of commodification and perceived authenticity of commercial homes in rural areas. Both commodification and perceived authenticity are treated as multi-dimensional and measurable constructs. Three sets of hypotheses regarding their relationships are tested with a hierarchical dataset comprising 188 commercial home owners and 873 tourists in northern Zhejiang Province, China. Findings from hierarchical linear modeling indicate that commodification of place and labor negatively affects cognitive authenticity, and commodification of hosts' goals negatively affects relational authenticity. In contrast, no significant effects are found on constructive authenticity. A conclusive model is then proposed, and research implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: Commercial Home; Commodification; Perceived Authenticity; Rural China; Hierarchical Linear Modeling

1 Introduction

Tourism is a major driver of the commodification of modern society, which turns toured objects/activities into commodities to be exchanged for profit (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015). Such touristic commodification is supposed to exert profound impacts on the authenticity of objects (e.g., culture, lifestyle). From the essentialist/objectivist standpoint, commodification will destroy the originality, replace it with surrogate “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973), and thereby reduce the cultural value and appeal to tourists (Cole, 2007; Go, 1997). In contrast, the constructivist/negotiation view regards commodification as a re-invention of the past or a re-creation of authenticity, which strengthens and sustains its value and cultural appeal (Adams, 1997; Chhabra, 2010).

Such a disparity in view can be attributed to the different notions of defining authenticity. Indeed, definition of authenticity has undergone debates since it was first proposed, with different schools of viewpoints (e.g., essentialist, constructivist, existentialist). Suppliers, tourists and scholars define authenticity in different ways (Chhabra, 2010), and sometimes refute each other (Halewood & Hannam, 2001). This study does not intend to engage in the debate on “*what authenticity is*”, but rather it acknowledges the co-existence and compatibility of different forms of authenticity in tourism/hospitality settings (Chhabra, 2015; Wang, 1999). As such, it aims to bring insights into the dialogue from the perspective of tourists, and to examine “*how different forms of authenticity are perceived by tourists*” and “*how these forms of perceived authenticities are shaped by commodification in a tourism/hospitality setting*”.

In tourism and hospitality, authenticity is usually perceived by the demand side, whilst commodification occurs on the supply side. Compared with how authenticity is defined, tourists are more concerned about the extent to which it can be experienced. In this regard, the value of authenticity is dependent on the perception and evaluation by tourists (Kolar & Zabka, 2010). Notably, those supposed to be authentic/inauthentic by tourism operators/researchers could be perceived differently by tourists (Cohen, 1988; Cole, 2007). Given this subjective nature, measuring and explaining variation of perceived authenticity may endow the authenticity discourse with marketing and management implications.

The commercial home is a collective term referring to those small-scale, home-based and family-run accommodation units. They are usually the result of transforming rural residences to accommodate tourists for profit (Lynch, 2005), and encompass various forms of non-traditional hospitality units including small hotels, village inns, B&Bs, home stays, guesthouses, etc.. Commercial homes account for the largest proportion of accommodating capacity at most rural destinations (Perkins, 2006). With the boom of P2P sharing economy platforms (e.g., airbnb), they are gaining popularity among tourists, and thus are bearing prominent industrial role (Tussyadiah, 2015). Conceptually, commercial homes represent the commodification of rural homes, and thus occupy the transitional middle ground between the *intimate settings of homes* and *pure commercial hotels* (Kontogeorgopoulos, et al., 2015; Lynch, 2003). Their appeal to tourists is dependent on the authentic and locally embedded hospitality experience (Tussyadiah, 2015; Wang, N., 2007). Therefore, they provide an ideal setting for investigating the interaction between commodification and authenticity.

This quantitative study aims to model and test the effects of commodification on perceived authenticity in the context of commercial homes. Such an effort is rarely found in previous research, but is necessary for several reasons. First, although commodification has been extensively addressed in various cultural contexts, its consequences on hospitality remain under-researched. Second, as recent studies have started to take a marketing paradigm and treat authenticity as an alternative competitive edge for tourism businesses, an investigation of perceived authenticity and its precedents has great practical significance. Third, a quantitative investigation may provide robust empirical evidence to validate the claimed impacts of commodification from previous studies, most of which are derived through qualitative or conceptual research.

This study was conducted in north Zhejiang Province, China. Both commodification and perceived authenticity were operationalized as multi-dimensional, measurable constructs. Three sets of hypotheses regarding their relationships were proposed based on theories and previous research, and tested with a hierarchical dataset comprising 188 commercial home owners and 873 tourists. Data were collected via questionnaire surveys, and analyzed using

Hierarchical Linear Modeling. Finally, a conclusive model was drawn based on in-depth interpretation of the hypothesis testing results. The study's implications and limitations were also acknowledged.

2 Literature review

2.1 Touristic commodification and commercial homes

In classic tourism literature, commodification is defined as a process where objects/practices are transformed into commodities to be exchanged for profit based on a market value (Cohen, 1988). During this process, the producers are *alienated* from their produced objects (and labor), as the commodity may no longer be fully utilized by themselves (Shepherd, 2003). As such, the utility of a commodity is concealed underneath the exchange value, and its uniqueness is replaced by the uniform social status (Shepherd, 2003). This economic definition of commodification was also employed in the discourse of tourism, where it was first examined in relation to cultural tourism settings (Cohen, 1988), and later in social contexts such as rural culture and lifestyles (Perkins, 2006), and hospitality (Cole, 2007).

The commercial home emerges as rural tourism development results in the commodification of rural home settings (Lynch, 2003). In this sense, it represents both rural commodification and hospitality commodification: in the former case, rural household residence and its lifestyle become a commodity and gradually loses its rural characteristics (Perkins, 2006), while in the latter, hospitality transits from a private domain to a social/commercial domain (Lashley, 2008). Commercial homes are distinct from pure commercial hotels in that home element still remains their core appeal (Lynch, 2005). In this sense, they are typically referred to as “para-hotel businesses” or “quasi-hotels” (Slattery, 2002), and can be regarded as being the transitional middle ground between the intimate home setting and pure commercial hotels (Kontogeorgopoulos, et al., 2015). As such, they bear attributes of both private homes and commercial hotels, as demonstrated by: 1) shared use of the residence between guests and hosts; 2) families' participation in shaping the product with informal management system; and 3) lifestyle entrepreneurial motivation intertwined with profit goal

(Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007).

2.2 Commodification of the rural home

Before commodification occurs, rural homes remain in the private domain, and demonstrate their traditional attributes and lifestyle. The home setting and facilities are used by the families, domestic works (cleaning, catering) are carried out and utilized by family members themselves, and the home goal is for better life instead of making money. As commodification process develops, the commercial home demonstrates more attributes of a hotel and less attributes of a home, and thus undergo a transition from a “private home” to a “business enterprise” (Sweeney & Lynch, 2009). However, such a transition is a process comprising both gradual changes in home attributes (e.g., sparing more guest rooms) in response to the accumulated tourist flow, and sudden leaps (e.g., buy another building) when the tourist flow reaches certain thresholds.

Previous research has found that commodification of commercial homes can be observed through three changes. First, the host families (the producers) are *alienated* from the product (lodging, catering activities), which are specialized for tourist use (Lynch, 2005). Second, the host families (the producers) are *alienated* from their own labor, which are devoted to tourist service (Greenwood, 1989). Finally, the host becomes more entrepreneurial and profit-seeking (Lynch, 2005). Such transitions have been confirmed by various empirical findings (Ainley & Kline, 2014; Busby & Rendle, 2000). As such, the commodification degree of a commercial home can be assessed on three dimensions: place, labor, and goals (Table 1).

Table 1. Commodification of the rural home

	Un-commoditized	Slightly commoditized	Moderately commoditized	Highly commoditized	Fully commoditized
	<i>Private home</i>	-----	<i>Commercial home</i>	-----	<i>Hotel</i>
Place	Exclusively for family members	Low degree of use by guests	Moderate degree of use by guest	High degree of use by guests	Exclusively for guests
Labor force	Fully devoted to domestic work	Low degree of devotion to commercial accommodation, with or without a few hired personnel	Moderate degree of devotion to commercial accommodation, with a number of hired personnel	High degree of devotion to commercial accommodation, with a large proportion of hired personnel	Fully devoted to commercial accommodation, usually with all hired staff
Goal	Total dominance of lifestyle goal, without profit purpose	Dominate lifestyle goal	Symbiosis of lifestyle goal and profit goal	Dominant profit goal	Totally dominant profit goal, without lifestyle goal.

Source: Summarized by the authors from previous research.

Commodification of place measures the extent to which a home setting and its facilities are specialized for tourist needs rather than for family use. In a private home, residence is exclusively designed for daily use of family members, or for occasional use of non-paying friends or relatives. For those commodified homes, residence is more frequently used by paying tourists, and gradually loses its initial function as a family residence. Lynch and MacWhannell (2000) described such transformation as separation of space between the host family and the guests, where the host families less frequently shared the premises and facilities with the guests, and even moved out of the premises. Busby and Rendle (2000), in the context of farm stays, described this change as a transformation from “tourism in farms” to “farm tourism”.

Commodification of labor force measures the extent to which the commercial accommodation relies on family members for labor. In a private rural home, family labor is fully devoted to domestic work such as house maintenance and cooking, and the dominant relationships in the home are kinships. During the commodification process, family labor is invested to commercial accommodation, and domestic skills become inputs into service production. It has been observed that in commercial homes, family members are emotionally

and physically incorporated into commercial hospitality activities at different levels (Baines & Gelder, 2003; Lynch, 2003, 2005), ranging from accommodating the occasional paying guests during peak season, to attracting and hosting customers throughout the year (Lashley, 2009). Overtime, hired labor may decrease the proportion of family engagement (Lynch, 2005). This whole process was described by Lynch (2005) as a transition from “family-involvement” to “family-run” enterprise.

Commodification of goals measures the extent to which the hosts are entrepreneurial and profit-driven. As a consumptive organization, a family’s goals are usually better quality of life and welfare. This is in sharp contrast to the goals of a typical business, which are profit-maximization. Commercial homes are typically “lifestyle businesses” that bear both lifestyle goals and profit goals (McKercher & Robbins, 1998). During the commodification process, the host’s perceptions of the commercial home undergo a transition from “private home” to “business enterprise”. He/she becomes more entrepreneurial and profit driven, while the goal of improving one’s lifestyle is weakened (Lynch, 2005).

2.3 Authenticity: defined or perceived?

Authenticity is an important element of both tourist motivation and experience. Its definition, however, has been in the center of debate since MacCannell (1973) initiated this dialogue. In its initial form, authenticity is commonly viewed as the original, backstage reality of the object (e.g., culture, tradition) (MacCannell, 1973). Such an objectivist/essentialist view of authenticity is later challenged by constructivist notions that viewed authenticity as a judgement/belief/meaning constructed by the tourist and placed back on the setting (Adams, 1984). The constructivist view emphasizes on commodified authenticity such as hyper-real settings and pseudo-backstage, which is adapted to audience needs with a commercial goal (Chhabra, et al., 2003).

Wang (1999) further engaged in the dialogue with an existentialist view of authenticity, which is not dependent on the objects, but refers to a situation in which *personal or interpersonal feelings* are activated by the process of tourism activities. His classic model

systematically summarizes objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist perspectives of authenticity. However, as Wang, N. (2007) observed later, the classification system is still open to fresh insights. Belhassen, et al. (2008) noted that constructivist/existentialist ideology cannot exist without essentialist authenticity, and thus they propose a compromised form of authenticity, namely *theoplacity*. Based on this, Chhabra (2010) further developed Wang's (1999) tribasic model by introducing a fourth form: the negotiated authenticity. The negotiation form of authenticity occupies the middle ground and strikes a compromise between the essentialist and the constructivist, and between the essentialist and the existentialist. According to the model, most viewpoints/findings actually take such forms of negotiation between the extreme ends of ideologies (Chhabra, 2010). Despite the various schools of thoughts, scholars gradually acknowledge the existence of different forms of authenticity. In the tourism setting, Wang (1999) claimed that the three forms of authenticity are so interrelated that no single distinct form should be (or could be) negated as a whole during a trip. Chhabra (2010, 2015) also agreed that different forms of authenticity may be collaborated and negotiated, reaching a compromise.

Given the various forms of authenticity, one question is: how do tourists perceive these different forms of authenticity? Waitt's (2000) and Cole's (2007) examination identified a huge gap between the suppliers' and tourists' perceptions of the same type of authenticity. Wang (1999) and Kolar and Zabka (2010) added that perceived authenticity did not create black and white categories, but was *a question of degree*. These findings give rise to the marketing and management paradigm, which aims at exploiting the consumer value embedded in perceived authenticity (Kolar & Zabka, 2010). Based on post-modern consumption patterns, such a paradigm assumes that perceived authenticity has overtaken service quality as the prevailing purchase criterion, and thus could be the major source of competitive advantage (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Thus the major concern is dimensionality, precedents, and the behavioral consequences of perceived authenticity, which can be modeled and tested using quantitative methods. Empirical research can be found in the food and restaurant industry (Robinson & Clifford, 2011) and wine and winery tours (Kim & Bonn, 2015). However, empirical work is

rarely found in the hospitality domain, though authenticity is also found to be pursued and perceived in such contexts (Chhabra, 2015; Lashley, 2008).

2.4 Perceived authenticity in commercial homes

Perceived authenticity in rural commercial homes should be contextualized in the experience and motivation of rural tourism (Carmichael & McClinchey, 2009; Martin, 2010). Previous research asserts that the appeal of rural areas for tourism and recreation lies primarily in their intrinsic rural characteristics, or rurality (Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997), including rural people and their lifestyles that remain untouched by modernism and still maintain tradition and customs (Bramwell, 1994). Therefore, hospitality authenticity in the rural commercial home setting takes its root in the spatial-cultural identity of rural areas, the social identity of home, and a phenomenological identity of rural image (Cohen, 1979; Lashley, 2008; Trauer & Ryan, 2005). As such, hospitality authenticity in the commercial home is a combination of the three forms of authenticity (objectivist, constructivist, inter-personal existentialist) (Wang, N., 1999, 2007), and refers to the extent to which guests perceive what they encountered in the accommodation setting as genuine, sincere and inspiring. It is perceived and evaluated in relation to both tangible elements (provision of meal, beverage, lodging and entertainment), and intangible elements (host-guest relations, imagination and inspiration) (Lashley, 2000; Lugosi, 2008).

First, authentic hospitality involves a genuine contact with the rural community via tangibility of the accommodation setting, whereby real rural culture and lifestyles can be cognized and experienced (Trauer & Ryan, 2005). Such authenticity belongs to the objectivist version, and can be named as “*cognitive authenticity*”, which is operationalized as the extent to which a guest perceives the commercial home setting as a genuine rural home. Tourists stay in commercial homes because they wish to experience the local lifestyle (Bramwell, 1994), and thus it is important to them that the lifestyle activities, the related tools and settings they experience are exactly what local people have in their daily lives. As mentioned by MacCannell (1979), tourists are interested in entering the backstage of tourism settings, as it is associated

with more authentic experience.

Second, authentic hospitality is originally experienced in domestic/private settings with shared norms defined for hosts and guests, and is characterized by a pure relationship with their hosts (Lashley, 2008). This form of authenticity is based on the inter-personal existentialist notion (Wang, 1999), and can be labelled as “*relational authenticity*”. It is operationalized as the extent to which guests perceive their relationships with the hosts that are natural, friendly, and authentic. Musa, Kayat, and Thirumoorthi (2010) describe it as a “warm feeling of companionship” that makes the guests feel they belong to the hosts’ family. Trauer and Ryan (2005) added that such authenticity involves closer relationships, reciprocity between hosts and guests, and naturally shared activities (e.g., meals). Relational authenticity is considered a distinguishing feature of hospitality in *pre-capitalist* societies, where hospitality is the purpose on its own (Bruckner, 1980). In contrast, hospitality in *capitalist* societies is considered as commercialized, depersonalized pseudo-hospitality, which is based on transactional relationships, and characterized by “leave and pay” attitudes (Olesen, 1994).

Lastly, authentic hospitality can also be viewed from the constructivist standpoint, where it is treated as an inspiring “spiritual center” (Cohen, 1979) that recalls memories, inspires feelings and images, and constructs meanings. This form of authenticity can be named *constructive authenticity*, which is operationalized as the degree to which the offerings of a commercial home can invoke in tourists certain ideas/meanings that are constructed a priori or during the encounter. Such a definition is consistent with those of Grayson and Martinec (2004), and Kolar and Zabkar (2010), which indicate that constructive authenticity is assessed in terms of “how inspiring the artifacts are”, whereas objective authenticity is assessed by determining “how original these artifacts are”. Bruner (1994) agreed that constructive authenticity is related to the meanings and images tourists attach to the stay in the commercial home. In this sense, a rural commercial home is experienced as authentic not because it actually is authentic, but because it is deemed a symbol of authenticity.

The above tribasic view of perceived authenticity is proposed on the basis of Wang’s

(1999) model. Similar conceptions can be found in a number of quantitative studies in non-hospitality settings (Cho, 2012; Kim & Bonn, 2015).

3 Commodification and perceived authenticity: the hypothesized model

The above review discussion demonstrates that commodification is a series of changes on the supply side in terms of physical elements (place and labor) and subjective elements (goal). These changes may serve as a stimulus/cue that tourists use to understand the loss of authenticity. The underlying logics, however, vary by the different forms of authenticity.

From an essentialist viewpoint, commodification will eclipse the originality and genuineness of the toured or tourees such as culture and lifestyle (Cohen, 1979, 1988; Medina, 2003). It is supposed to give a phenomenon an alienating and uniform exchange value, which hides the uniqueness and utility (Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994). In this way, the cultural products/practices are transformed in such a degree that they eventually become meaningless for their producers (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, the tourees will protect and insulate their culture by separating their lives into backstage areas, and perform a limited range of activities in the front stage, resulting in *staged authenticity* (MacCannell, 1976).

Similar physical cues of change are also found in the context of commercial homes. Commodification will reshape the traditional rural lifestyle, and create a “staged home” tailored for rural tourists: the host family organizes their life differently; the accommodation facilities are less like home necessities for family life; and the people there are less like rural family members (Greenwood, 1989). Ainley and Kline (2014) observed that as the hosts’ economic dependence on commercial let increased, other means of livelihood (such as farming) would diminish or be absorbed by the business. As a result, fewer opportunities are available for guests to interact with an “authentic home space” (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007). These physical changes will lead to altered experience environment, and thus can easily be perceived by tourists during their stay (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that as commodification increases, tourists visiting commercial homes may perceive fewer home elements and more business elements (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007; Sweeney & Lynch, 2009),

implying decreased cognitive authenticity. Therefore, the following hypotheses are derived.

Hypothesis 1: Commodification is negatively correlated with cognitive authenticity.

Specifically:

Hypothesis 1a: The commodification of place is negatively correlated with cognitive authenticity.

Hypothesis 1b: The commodification of labor is negatively correlated with cognitive authenticity.

Hypothesis 1c: The commodification of the hosts' goals is negatively correlated with cognitive authenticity.

From the constructivist standpoint, the commodification process may lead to a re-creation of authenticity: the transaction between tourists and tourees generates new cultural configurations which by themselves form authenticities to their participants (Adams, 1997; Medina, 2003). However, such a successful commodification has to meet tourists' needs, attribute value to the toured objects, and generate new demand (Chhabra et al., 2003; Medina, 2003). Through a case study in heritage accommodation, Chhabra (2015) presents that successful commodification should have distinct agenda, follow long-term strategy based on local community and culture, and maintain its uniqueness. As the commodification process has inherent nature of standardization, tourism developers have to create alternative uniqueness for the toured objects, so as to strengthen its usefulness and impressiveness (Halewood & Hannam, 2001).

A successful commodification is dependent on the conscious activities of the entrepreneur, and it is demanding for their creativeness, strategic capability and resources. Unlike large hotels, commercial homes are mostly owned and operated by individual families with limited innovativeness, capability and resources (Lynch, 2003; Thomas, 2000), and they are much less capable of creating new uniqueness to offset standardization. Their commodification has been found to diminish the home's uniqueness and distinctiveness, making rural hospitality a mass-produced product characterized by service protocols, productivity and uniform design (Cole, 2007; Ritzer, 2008). Once this happens, rural accommodations become ordinary, and are less

likely to inspire emotional feedback from tourists. This claim is empirically supported by previous research in different contexts (e.g. Zeng, Go, & Vries, 2012). Therefore, the following hypotheses are developed,

Hypothesis 2: The degree of commodification is negatively correlated with constructive authenticity.

Specifically:

Hypothesis 2a: The commodification of place is negatively correlated with constructive authenticity.

Hypothesis 2b: The commodification of labor is negatively correlated with constructive authenticity.

Hypothesis 2c: The commodification of the hosts' goals is negatively correlated with constructive authenticity.

Finally, commodification is detrimental to the sincerity and genuineness of social relations, as it changes the meanings of human relationships, and replaces them with a surrogate, covert pseudo-hospitality, in which contrived relations are performed for the tourists in order to generate profit (Cohen, 1979, 1988). As in the context of commercial homes, commodification will decrease the amount of host-guest interaction and deteriorate the genuine host-guest relationship that is a characteristic of rural hospitality. The host families thus gradually become like hotel staff (Olesen, 1994), and the host-guest relationships become more and more reliant on monetary transactions. The initial genuine domestic hospitality gradually becomes a commercial offering to paying consumers, which tourists do not see as expressions of genuine hospitableness (Wang, N., 2007). These propositions have been supported by a number of empirical research in different cultural contexts (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007; Lashley & Rowson, 2005; Wang, N., 2007). Therefore, it is hypothesized that,

Hypothesis 3: Commodification is negatively correlated with relational authenticity.

Specifically:

Hypothesis 3a: The commodification of place is negatively correlated with relational

authenticity.

Hypothesis 3b: The commodification of labor is negatively correlated with relational authenticity.

Hypothesis 3c: The commodification of hosts' goals is negatively correlated with relational authenticity.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research context and study area

This study focuses on both commercial home owners and their guests. Commercial homes in China have been a core attraction for rural tourists for decades. Their dominant role over commercial hotels in most rural destinations could be attributed to several reasons. First, rural tourism demand suffers severe seasonality, which puts conventional hotels at a disadvantage, but favors commercial homes featuring fungibility of resources between home and business. Second, rural entrepreneurs usually have very limited capital and resources, and thus are unable to be involved in formal commercial accommodation businesses. External investors with adequate resources and experience, meanwhile, will not engage in commercial homes unless the investment can generate tempting profits. Finally, commercial hotels tend to suffer from cost disadvantages in relation to commercial homes, as the latter are often free from taxation.

The empirical part of this study was implemented in three regions in northern Zhejiang Province, China: *Changxing*, *Anji*, and *Deqing*. Commercial homes in these regions are commonly named as *Nongjiale* (happy farm house). In 2014, *Nongjiales* in this area received over 23.52 million tourists, generating a total revenue of more than four billion *yuan* (Xinhua Tourism, 2015). Figure 1 presents the appearance of a typical *Nongjiale*. Five villages in the study area were selected as sampling sites: *Guzhu*, *Daxi*, *Houwu*, *Biwu*, and *Lingkengli* (Table 2).



Figure 1. A typical *Nongjiale* in the study area

Table 2. Profiles of the sample villages (as of 2015)

	<i>Guzhu</i>	<i>Daxi</i>	<i>Houwu</i>	<i>Biwu</i>	<i>Lingkengli</i>
Population	2,567	2,087	1,606	896	1,360
Number of <i>Nongjiale</i>	312	167	76	56	47

4.2 Variables and measurement

As commodification occurs on the supply side, the three dimensions of commodification were measured by surveying commercial home owners. Specifically, commodification of place was measured as the extent to which a home and its facilities were specialized for guest use. Five types of facilities commonly found in *Nongjiale* were considered: guest rooms (FAC1), canteens (FAC2), kitchens (FAC3), gardens (FAC4), and entertainment facilities (FAC5). The *Nongjiale* owners were asked to score the extent to which their families sharing above facilities with guests on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “very frequently” (1) to “very rarely” (5). The commodification of goals was operationalized as the extent to which the *Nongjiale* owner-operator was oriented towards profit rather than lifestyle goals. Three measurement items were ranked with a 5-point Likert scale, including “With regard to operating the *Nongjiale*, how important to you is increasing profit?” (GOA1), “If the business performance was poor, how worried would you be?” (GOA2), and “Do you think you are operating the *Nongjiale* to enjoy a certain lifestyle?” (GOA3). The commodification of the labor force was operationalized as the percentage of hired staff members. For all three dimensions of commodification, a higher value indicated a higher degree of commodification.

Authenticity was perceived by tourists, and thus the three forms of authenticity were

measured by surveying tourists. Measurement items for the three dimensions of perceived authenticity were generated based on 14 in-depth interviews (Table 3) conducted with guests at the study sites between 11 and 27 of December 2015. Drawing on the operationalized definition of perceived authenticity, the interviewees were asked to discuss their experience in commercial homes based on three questions: “What aspects of your experience do you think are authentic?”, “Has your stay inspired you?”, and “What aspects of your relationship with the host family do you think are authentic?”. The interview questions were assessed by the authors to make sure they fit into the definitions of cognitive, constructive and relational authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Wang, 1999). Purposeful sampling was employed in order to make sure that selected interviewees cover different backgrounds. Once an interviewee was selected, the interviewer would seek his/her approval and make reservation for the time and venue for the interview, which was usually the last day of his/her stay. The interview stopped where or when saturation was felt.

Table 3. Profile of the interviewees

No.	Gender	Age	Marital status	Profession	Length of stay
1	Female	21	Single	College student	1 night
2	Female	25	Single	Graduate student	2 nights
3	Male	25	Single	IT company employee	1 night
4	Male	27	Married	Bank employee	2 nights
5	Male	35	Married	Government employee	1 night
6	Female	34	Married	Government employee	1 night
7	Male	29	Married	Self-employed	2 nights
8	Female	26	Single	Primary school teacher	1 night
9	Female	41	Married	Self-employed	1 night
10	Female	20	Single	College student	2 nights
11	Male	51	Married	Company employee	1 night
12	Female	55	Married	Retired	7 nights
13	Male	60	Married	Retired	15 nights
14	Male	58	Married	Retired	5 nights

Content analysis was used to generate a series of items for each dimension of authenticity. Content validity of the items was checked by a panel of tourism scholars to ensure that the items accurately reflected the definition of the corresponding dimension. A pilot test was then carried out in February of 2016, with 41 questionnaires collected. Based on the feedback from

the pilot study participants, a few items were deleted or paraphrased to avoid repetition or to clarify meaning. The final scale has three items for each dimension of authenticity (Table 4). The items for the three authenticity constructs were scored with a 7-point Likert scale.

Table 4. Measurements of perceived authenticity

Abbrev.	Construct	Items
AUTcog	Cognitive authenticity	"The <i>Nongjiale</i> is a real rural family." (COG1)
		"The <i>Nongjiale</i> presents the daily life of a rural family." (COG2)
		"I felt part of a rural family during the stay." (COG3)
AUTcon	Constructive authenticity	"I can tell the aesthetic standards of the host from the design." (CON1)
		"I can tell the character of the host from the design." (CON2)
		"I can tell the lifestyle preferences of the host from the design." (CON3).
AUTrel	Relational authenticity	"I stayed with the host as if I was family." (REL1)
		"The host and I trusted each other." (REL2)
		"I sincerely appreciated the host's treatment of me." (REL3)

Moreover, it was found that the perceptions of authenticity might also be affected by personal traits, trip traits and previous experience of the tourist (Chhabra et al., 2003; Littrell, Anderson, & Brown, 1993), as well as the attributes of the commercial homes that provide perceived cues (Cohen, 1988; Wang, N., 2007). Following previous studies, several control variables were also measured, including business age, price, location, and demographic traits and previous experience of the guests (Table 5).

Table 5. Measurements of control variables

Abbrev.	Variable	Specification
BUZage	Business age	The number of years the business has been in operation.
PRICE	Price of accommodation product	The average cost of a one-night stay per person; the weekend price was used, as this is the peak times for rural accommodations.
LOC	Location of the business	The village the business was located in. As the samples were collected from five villages, namely “Guzhu,” “Daxi,” “Lingkengli,” “Houwu,” and “Biwu”, four dummy variables were created to represent the business locations.
GENDR	Gender of the guest	Assigned as “male” or “female.”
AGE	Age of the guest	Assigned into seven categories: “Below 18”; “18-25”; “26-35”; “36-45”; “46-55”; “56-65”; and “Above 65.”
EDU	Education level of the guest	Assigned into five categories: “Primary school”; “Secondary school”; “High school”; “College”; and “Post-graduate.”
MARR	Marital status of the guest	Assigned to “Married” or “Single.”
RURLIF	Rural life experience of the guest	Number of years the guest has lived in rural areas.
RURTOU	Rural travel experience	Average travel frequency of the guest during the past three years.
NIGHTS	Length of stay in the accommodation unit	Number of nights the guest stayed in the accommodation unit.

4.3 Survey and data

Data were collected through two rounds of surveys implemented between 1 and 7 March 2016. In the first survey, questionnaires were distributed to *Nongjiale* owners to gather information regarding their commodification level, business age, etc.. In total, 200 *Nongjiale* owners were surveyed. The second round of survey aimed at guests of these 200 *Nongjiales* to collect information regarding their experience and personal attributes. In total, 873 guest surveys from 188 *Nongjiales* were completed. For each *Nongjiale*, the number of completed guest surveys ranged from 1 to 10. The geographical distribution and profiles of the samples are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Geographical distribution of the samples

Sample site	Commercial home sample	Guest sample
<i>Guzhu</i>	59	354
<i>Daxi</i>	65	306
<i>Houwu</i>	28	74
<i>Biwu</i>	23	74
<i>Lingkengli</i>	25	65
Total	200	873

Table 7. Personal/demographic attributes of the guests

	N	Percent		N	Percent
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Education level</i>		
Male	427	48.9%	Primary school	22	2.5%
				16	
Female	446	51.1%	Secondary school	2	18.6%
				25	
			High school	0	28.6%
				39	
<i>Age</i>			College	1	44.8%
<18	19	2.2%	Post-graduate	48	5.5%
18 - 25	95	10.9%			
26 - 35	176	20.2%	<i>Marriage</i>		
				71	
36 - 45	157	18%	Married	2	81.6%
				15	
46 - 55	148	17%	Single	3	17.5%
56 - 65	133	15.2%			
>65	145	16.6%			

4.4 Hierarchical Linear Modelling

The data generated by the commercial home owner survey (at group level) and the guest survey (at individual level) form a cross-level, hierarchical data set. Thus two-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used to analyze the data, with the assistance of the HLM 7.0 software package. The step-up strategy (Garson, 2013) was adopted and a sequence of hierarchical linear models were constructed to predict different forms of perceived authenticity: the null model, random intercept covariance model (RIC model), and intercept-as-outcome model (IaO model).

The null model was constructed to test whether there is a group-level clustering effect and is specified as,

Level-1

$$AUT_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

Level-2

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \mu_{0j}$$

where,

AUT_{ij} is the perceived authenticity of i^{th} tourist in j^{th} commercial home,

r_{ij} is the level-1 random error,

μ_{0j} is the level-2 random error,

β is the level-1 regression coefficient, and,

γ is the level-2 regression coefficient.

The RIC model incorporates the level-1 control variables, and takes the following form,

Level-1

$$AUT_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}GENDR + \beta_{2j}AGE + \beta_{3j}EDU + \beta_{4j}MARR + \beta_{5j}RURLIF \\ + \beta_{6j}RURTOU + \beta_{7j}NIGHTS + r_{ij}$$

Level-2

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \mu_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20}$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30}$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \gamma_{40}$$

$$\beta_{5j} = \gamma_{50}$$

$$\beta_{6j} = \gamma_{60}$$

$$\beta_{7j} = \gamma_{70}$$

The IaO model further incorporates level-2 variables, and is specified as,

Level-1

$$AUT_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}GENDR + \beta_{2j}AGE + \beta_{3j}EDU + \beta_{4j}MARR + \beta_{5j}RURLIF \\ + \beta_{6j}RURTOU + \beta_{7j}NIGHTS + r_{ij}$$

Level-2

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}COMplace + \gamma_{02}COMlabor + \gamma_{03}COMgoal + \gamma_{04}BUZage + \gamma_{05}PRICE \\ + \gamma_{06}LOC + \mu_{0j}$$

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20}$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30}$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \gamma_{40}$$

$$\beta_{5j} = \gamma_{50}$$

$$\beta_{6j} = \gamma_{60}$$

$$\beta_{7j} = \gamma_{70}$$

where γ_{01} , γ_{02} , γ_{03} represent the effects of the three commodification indicators respectively.

5 Findings

5.1 Reliability and validity

The commodification of place and goals, and the three dimensions of perceived authenticity were treated as latent variables, each measured with a set of items. Cronbach's α values are all above 0.7, indicating good reliability (Table 8). The KMO values are mostly above 0.7 and Bartlett's test of Sphericity demonstrates a significance level of 0.01, implying that the data are suitable for factor analysis (Table 9). Factor loadings of the items are all above 0.7 (except for FAC1 and FAC5, which are above 0.5), and only one factor was extracted for each set of items (Table 10). This implies that the items can represent at least fifty percent of the construct it measures (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011), demonstrating good construct validity (Ratti et al., 2017).

Table 8. Cronbach's α coefficient

Constructs	Item number	Cronbach's α
COMplace	5	0.739
COMgoal	3	0.824
AUTcog	3	0.898
AUTcon	3	0.965
AUTrel	3	0.946

Table 9. KMO and Bartlett's test of Sphericity

		COMplace	COMgoal	AUTcon	AUTobj	AUTrel
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure		0.712	0.069	0.775	0.747	0.754
Bartlett' Test of Sphericity						
	Approx. Chi-Square	237.272	232.601	3190.506	1605.818	2554.955
	df.	10	3	3	3	3
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Table 10. Factor loadings of the measurement items

Constructs	Items	Factor loading
COMplace	FAC1	.545
	FAC2	.750
	FAC3	.811
	FAC4	.765
	FAC5	.636
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>50.117</i>
COMgoal	GOA1	.899
	GOA2	.892
	GOA3	.799
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>74.767</i>
AUTcog	COG1	.901
	COG2	.925
	COG3	.908
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>83.051</i>
AUTcon	CON1	.963
	CON2	.974
	CON3	.964
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>93.495</i>
AUTrel	REL1	.944
	REL2	.965
	REL3	.941
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>90.264</i>

Note: The extraction method is principal component analysis;

1 component extracted for each set of items.

5.2 Results of HLM

Using factor scores calculated by a linear combination of item scores based on factor loadings.

The sequence of hierarchical model sets was estimated (Table 11). The *ICC* values range

between 0.134 to 0.343 for the three model sets with significant Chi-square values, indicating significant clustering effect, and thus the HLM method is necessary. For the IaO models, the $R^2_{between}$ values are 0.585, 0.596, and 0.607 respectively, indicating good predictive power of level-2 variables.

Table 11. Random effects of HLM

	AUTcog			AUTcon			AUTrel		
	Null	RIC	IaO	Null	RIC	IaO	Null	RIC	IaO
σ^2	14.384	14.361	14.317	14.768	14.698	14.487	18.673	18.652	18.520
τ^2	2.228	1.718	1.580	7.700	4.773	3.799	6.278	4.768	4.378
ICC	0.134			0.343			0.252		
R^2_{within}		0.002	0.005		0.005	0.019		0.001	0.008
$R^2_{between}$		0.229	0.291		0.380	0.507		0.241	0.303
λ^2	319.676	280.741	259.229	638.156	461.893	389.061	478.235	403.816	368.200
<i>Sig.</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
<i>-2dll</i>		31.185	25.942		73.401	98.009		46.015	51.748

The effects of both level-1 and level-2 variables can be derived from the fixed effects of the full models (Table 12). All three dimensions of commodification have significant negative effect on at least one form of perceived authenticity. Specifically, the commodification of place and labor negatively affects cognitive authenticity, which implies that commercial homes where the residence and facilities are more specialized for tourist use, or the proportion of non-family, hired staff is higher, tend to be perceived as less authentic rural homes. Thus *Hypothesis 1a* and *1b* are both supported. None of the three dimensions of commodification has significant effect on constructive authenticity, and thus *Hypothesis 2a*, *2b*, *2c* are not supported. Only the commodification of goal has significant, negative effect on relational authenticity: as the commercial home owner-operator becomes more profit-oriented, tourists will perceive a less genuine relationship with their host, and thus *Hypothesis 3c* is supported. The commodification of place and labor, however, demonstrates no significant effect, and thus neither *Hypothesis 3a* nor *3b* is supported.

Table 12. Fixed effects of HLM

	AUTcog			AUTcon			AUTrel		
	Null	RIC	Full	Null	RIC	Full	Null	RIC	Full
INTRCPT	12.921^a	12.223^a	13.647^a	0.245^a	10.425^a	10.597^a	12.450^a	12.854^a	14.898^a
<i>Level 2</i>									
COMplace			-0.158^b			0.008			-0.070
COMlabor			-1.455^c			0.176			-1.182
COMgoal			-0.017			0.012			-0.172^b
BUZage			-0.020			-0.013			0.045
PRICE			0.001			0.003^a			-0.002
LOC=									
<i>Guzhu,</i>			1.302^c			-2.498^a			1.723^b
<i>Daxi</i>			0.634			-0.866			-0.028
<i>Lingkengli</i>			0.866			-0.735			2.686^b
<i>Houwu</i>			-0.620			0.260			-0.572
<i>Biwu</i>									
<i>Level 1</i>									
GENDR=									
<i>Male</i>		-0.076	-0.051		-0.021	-0.010		0.065	0.124
<i>Female</i>									
AGE=									
<i>Below 18</i>		0.131	0.419		5.048 ^a	3.752^a		-2.689	-1.607
<i>18-25</i>		-1.183 ^c	-0.987		1.174 ^c	0.230		-1.627 ^b	-0.988
<i>26-35</i>		-0.668	-0.422		1.857 ^a	0.771		-1.384 ^b	-0.680
<i>36-45</i>		-0.333	-0.118		1.893 ^a	0.952		-1.087 ^c	-0.466
<i>46-55</i>		-0.728	-0.713		1.465 ^b	1.067^c		0.104	0.316
<i>56-65</i>		0.110	0.130		1.556 ^a	1.331^b		1.122 ^b	1.273
<i>Above 65</i>									
EDU=									
<i>Primary</i>		0.072	-0.183		-1.528	-1.049		-0.841	-1.303
<i>Secondary</i>		0.870	0.706		-2.491 ^a	-1.801^a		-0.066	-0.460
<i>High</i>		1.001	0.881		-1.346 ^b	-0.658		-0.140	-0.503
<i>College</i>		0.793	0.736		-1.004 ^b	-0.670		0.001	-0.214
<i>Graduate</i>									
MARR=									
<i>Married</i>		0.491	0.429		-0.080	0.122		0.786	0.675
<i>Single</i>									
RURLIF		-0.185 ^c	-0.136		0.335 ^a	0.283^a		-0.145	-0.074
RURTOU		0.268 ^c	0.263^c		0.319 ^a	0.279^b		0.036	0.052
NIGHTS		-0.198 ^a	-0.204^a		0.143 ^c	0.176^b		-0.083	-0.082

Note: ^a, ^b, and ^c denote significance at the 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively.

Also notable are the effects of the other level-2 independent variables that represent the attributes of the commercial home. Price exerts a positive effect on constructive authenticity,

which implies that commercial homes charging higher prices tend to be perceived as more inspiring, and better in demonstrating uniqueness. Business location has a significant effect on perceived authenticity: Commercial homes located in *Guzhu* are perceived as more authentic rural homes, with more natural and genuine interpersonal relationships, but less inspiring than those located in *Biwu*. The reason is that *Guzhu* has only recently developed rural tourism, and thus maintains more rural attributes. This finding echoes Carmichael and McClinchey's (2009) model, which indicates that rural tourists' experiences are shaped not only by the accommodation site, but also by the rural landscape and lifestyle.

As for level 1 variables representing tourists' personal attributes, gender and marital status do not affect perceived authenticity. Age has a significant effect on constructive authenticity: Compared to those over 65, tourists aged younger than 18, between 46 and 55, or between 56 and 65 are more inspired by their stays in commercial homes. Similarly, education level has a significant effect on constructive authenticity: Tourists with secondary education are less inspired than those with graduate education. The experience of living and traveling in rural areas has a significant effect on constructive authenticity, and rural travel experience further exerts a positive effect on cognitive authenticity. The length of stay is negatively related to cognitive authenticity, but positively related to constructive authenticity. This makes sense, as during a longer stay, tourists may become more aware of the commodified aspects of a commercial home. However, a longer stay could increase interaction with the host and the place, and thus increase inspiration.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This empirical study tests the effects of commodification on perceived authenticity in commercial homes. Perceived authenticity is decomposed into cognitive authenticity, relational authenticity and constructive authenticity, while commodification is operationalized as changes in place, labor force and goal. The result shows that different forms of authenticities are affected by commodification in different ways. First, cognitive authenticity is negatively affected by commodification of place and labor. This finding is consistent with previous research (Ainley

& Kline, 2014; Sweeney & Lynch, 2009), which shows that as a commercial home gains more business elements and less home elements, its guests may feel the change and perceive less genuineness. The commodification of goal, however, has no significant effect on cognitive authenticity. Second, the effects of commodification on relational authenticity are just on the contrary to those on cognitive authenticity, commodification of goal negatively affects relational authenticity, while commodification of place and labor has no significant effect. This finding echoes previous research by Wang, N. (2007). Finally, although prior studies argued for potential impacts of commodification on constructive authenticity, the current research does not identify or justify any significant influence in this regard.

The above findings can be summarized and further discussed based on *the spectrum of consciousness* (Wilber, 1993). According to Wilber, human consciousness develops at the physical level, and transits through the biological and mental levels onto the spiritual level, i.e., from the superficial to the deeper level. Accordingly, different forms of perceived authenticity can be regarded as a hierarchy of psychological responses formed on different layers of human consciousness: Cognitive authenticity as a cognitive response on the first tier, relational authenticity as an emotional response on the second tier, and constructive authenticity as a spiritual response on the third tier (Figure 2). Different levels of perceived authenticity can be induced by different cues (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), with varying degrees of engagement at the physical/intellectual, social/emotional, and spiritual levels (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). On the other hand, the commodification process transforms the commercial home, alienates the host families from the home setting and catering activities (Shepherd, 2003), causes standardization of an accommodation (Halewood & Hannam, 2001), and strengthens the motivation for profits (Lynch, 2003). As such, all the tangible cues (place and labor), symbolic cues (uniqueness and impressiveness), and human cues (goals of the hosts) will be modified, resulting in changes in perceived authenticity.

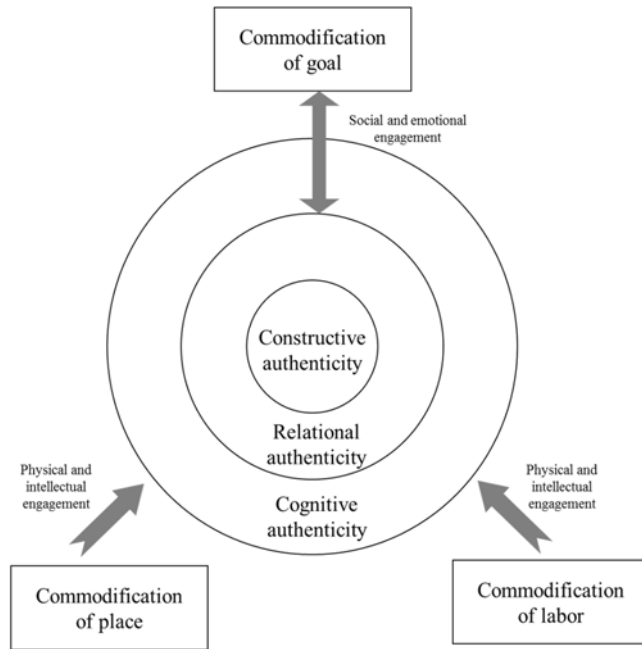


Figure 2. Effects of commodification on authenticity in commercial homes

Cognitive authenticity is perceived by tourists through physical and intellectual engagement with the tangible cues of the toured setting. That is, a judgement of authenticity is formed through collecting cues derived from the superficial physical setting, and processing such cues based on the knowledge of what a real rural home is like. Conceptually, place and people are the core elements of a rural family, the physical media of rural lifestyle (Cohen, 1988; Kastenholtz & Sparrer, 2009), and the setting for domestic hospitality to occur (Carmichael & McClinchey, 2009). Given the presence of features designed for guests (commodified place) and non-family members (commodified labor), tourists may perceive commercial homes as a less authentic rural home. In contrast, commodification of goals is the subjective conception of the host, which belongs to the intangible aspect of commodification, and thus has little impact on cognitive authenticity.

As an existentialist form, relational authenticity is an intersubjective belief, thought or feeling (Chhabra, 2010; Wang, 1999). As a complement to the formation of cognitive authenticity (physical/intellectual engagement through tangible cues), relational authenticity is perceived via social/emotional engagement with humanistic cues of the setting, i.e., the host families (Wang, Y., 2007). Such an engagement generates evaluations of the nature of the host-

guest relationships and the motive for hospitality (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007; Lashley & Rowson, 2005). As such, relational authenticity has little to do with physical elements, but it can be affected by the commodification of subjective elements such as motivation and goal.

Constructive authenticity is constructed by the tourists themselves based on deep, complex, spiritual engagement with both symbolic cues of the commercial home setting (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), and internal elements including individual experience, memory, and beliefs (Adams, 1984). Results of these two forms of engagement are subjective and are constitutive of one another (Wang, 1999). As such, constructive authenticity lies on the deepest tier, and is not as easily affected by external changes as cognitive/relational authenticity. Therefore, its relationship with commodification is much more complicated. On the one hand, the commodification process with mass standardized production will destroy the uniqueness of a toured object, and reduce inspiring symbolic cues (Zeng, Go, & de Vries, 2012). On the other hand, commodification strategies with creativeness and innovation may bring about a creative destruction of authenticity (Azeredo-Grünwald, 2002; Mitchell, 1998), whereby new meanings and uniqueness are created and symbolic cues are maintained.

The effect of commodification on constructive authenticity is uncertain, due to the potential moderating role of commodification strategy. Its exact effect is largely dependent on the extent to which strategic planning during the commodification process can offset the detrimental standardization effect by creating new uniqueness and attractiveness to tourists. This explanation is consistent with many previous findings (Chhabra, 2015; Mason, 2004; Su, 2011), which indicate that commodification with careful designs and innovativeness may help sustain folk customs and traditions, while providing economic opportunities for regional development.

This conclusive model implies that different forms of authenticity can co-exist in a hospitality setting, and further reveals how authenticity is perceived differently by the tourists. This all-inclusive, perceived view of authenticity is a further advancement based on previous research. For example, Jennings and Stehlik (2001) found multiple authenticities in farm-stays, including an experience similar to the lifestyle of the farm family (the objective form), an

orchestration of farm demonstrations (the staged form), and a mediation between the previous two experiences (the negotiated form). The finding also echoes prior research (Chhabra, 2010; Chhabra, et al., 2003) on co-existing travel motivations such as seeking authentic goods (essentialist), outdoor recreation (existentialist), and commodified spectacle (constructivist).

This model also provides empirical evidence for previous claims that commodification is detrimental to essentialist and inter-personal existentialist forms of authenticity. Generally, there are huge gaps between ensuring the authenticity of heritage and lifestyle, as well as ensuring tourists' perceptions of authenticity. What the owners or providers claim to have delivered might well be different from what is perceived. Thus, findings from this study provide another perspective to engage in the authenticity and commodification dialogue with prior researchers. In the meantime, this model provides empirical clues for understanding propositions raised in earlier research, which could subsequently sparkle new ideas or perspectives in this line of endeavor. For example, Cohen (1988, p.373) raised a concern about "false touristic consciousness" created by tourism operators that leads visitors into accepting contrived experiences as authentic. This study, however, reveals that it is no easy task to deceive tourists with faked rural lifestyles and contrived pseudo-hospitality. Such disparities could be attributed to the asymmetry of information or lack of knowledge on the part of the tourists.

Notably, although this model does not specify fixed, significant relationships between commodification and constructive authenticity, it draws on the perception of constructive authenticity, and the role of creative *commodification strategy* to provide explanations for such uncertain interactions. Previously, some scholars argue that commodification may lead to standardization, and thereby eclipse the uniqueness of the object. As such, the constructivist form of authenticity will be decreased (Zeng, Go, & Vries, 2012). Others propose that although standardization may decrease the symbolic cues which are necessary to induce constructive authenticity, new symbolic cues can also be created (Mitchell, 1987). This model further confirms the complexity of such relationships, and stresses the role of commodification strategy.

In addition, recent research revealed that a sustainable commodification strategy might strike a compromise between constructivist and essentialist forms of authenticity, and thereby

strengthen authentic experience while catering to market needs. Jennings and Stehlik (2001) reported their findings in a commodified farm stay where the providers could ensure quality service and fulfillment of commercial goals, while still striving to provide a genuine experience. More recently, Chhabra (2015) showed how a heritage accommodation unit, while catering to customer needs, strengthened objective and constructed authenticity. The premises for such successful strategies, however, lie in maintaining the heritage and tradition, as tangible evidence of objective authenticity is visible through traces of negotiated or constructed authenticity (Chhabra, 2010, 2015). Unlike heritage accommodations with a deliberate design and considerable investments, the commodification strategy of rural homes is only rudimentary and extensive. As such, emphasis should be placed on the potential effects of strategic planning in moderating between commodification and cognitive/relational authenticity.

7 Implications and limitations

The symbiotic relationship between authenticity and commodification has been an ongoing discussion central to tourism studies since the 1970s. *Annals of Tourism Research* has published a good number of articles on this subject (Cohen, 1988; Robinson & Clifford, 2012; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999; Wang, Y., 2007, amongst many others cited in this discussion), which have initiated and inspired this line of knowledge production. Although much has been said and different viewpoints have emerged, the subject as a whole is still open to new ideas and innovative approaches. Disputes need clarification and resolution, new perspectives or paradigms need further development, and findings from singular case studies could be subject to qualitative and quantitative evaluation or validation. This study examines “*how different forms of authenticity are perceived*” and “*how different forms of perceived authenticities are shaped by commodification*”. The discussion thereby contributes to the authenticity and commodification literature, particularly in terms of its touristic stance and its verified commodification-authenticity model in a commercial home setting.

In addition, this study integrates the dominant sociocultural perspective into the domain of marketing and tourist behavior research, and thereby offers empirical insights into the

discussion. Prior studies on authenticity largely focused on its sociocultural value, emphasizing that the conservation of cultural authenticity is critical to the appeal of a destination. The emerging post-modernist school of marketing argues that perceived authenticity is a new consumer value that helps (in)form a major competitive edge. Therefore, market reaction to commodification should be considered in addition to its sociocultural consequences.

Furthermore, by operationalizing and testing the relationships between authenticity and commodification, this study expands the boundary of scrutiny from induction to deduction, and in the meantime paves the way for future quantitative investigations. Prior qualitative inquiries into authenticity have generated numerous inspiring ideas and concepts, and have demonstrated a tenacity in tourism theory development. The generalizability and validity of such theories, however, should be tested through quantitative methodologies, for which this study could serve as an example, and foreseeably more measurement efforts will be needed in/as future endeavors.

Finally, this study brings the authenticity and commodification discussion into the hospitality context, specifically the commercial home setting. Both concepts have been extensively researched in tourism studies, but are rarely scrutinized in context of hospitality (Lashley, 2008). Recently, Chhabra (2015) raised attention to commodification and authenticity in a cultural hospitality context. This study echoes through a foray into the topic in a rural hospitality context in China. As such, it offers insights into future hospitality research along the same line of investigation.

On the practical implication side, findings from this study could be of value to rural tourism entrepreneurship. The competitive edges of commercial homes lie in the provision of authentic local experience, home accommodation, and sincere hospitality (Tussuadial, 2015). Thus entrepreneurs should be careful in maintaining authenticity while developing their commercial homes. Commodification could lead to the loss of cognitive and relational authenticity. As a substitute, entrepreneurs could also draw on constructive authenticity, and construct new meanings or uniqueness for tourists. For this very purpose, the entrepreneurs should enhance innovation and creativity in operating commercial home businesses. Notably, innovative and creative practices will be of huge implications in the sharing economy where

more and more commercial homes have entered (or are about to enter) the leisure and consumer markets.

Notwithstanding, this study has several limitations. First, the commodification process occurs over time, but the endeavor is based on cross-sectional data. It could thus serve as a baseline for future research to use longitudinal data. Second, the conclusions can only be statistically generalized to the study area. Future studies should generically examine more and broader contexts such as ancient towns, national parks, and so forth, so as to further validate the current conclusive model. Third, the intrapersonal existentialist form of authenticity has not been considered in this investigation, which in a way could serve as an avenue for future studies as well. Finally, this study involves limited types of commercial homes (i.e., *Nongjiale* in rural China); future research could expand the scope to incorporate more and diverse forms of rural hospitality.

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