

# Rethinking social value in host-guest encounters

## Distant conviviality, cursory lifestyle participation and the tourist experience

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### Background and Aim

‘Social value’ is increasingly positioned as important in understanding the tourist experience

Maitland (2008) introduced the concept of conviviality to address the connections tourists make to places and local people in a destination

He argues that an understanding of conviviality in the context of the tourist experience is yet to be established

This study explores how the host-guest relationship contributes to the tourist experience through a critical examination of social value and conviviality in the specific case of Chinese tourism to Copenhagen

We find that social interaction with locals are among the peak experiences for Chinese tourists visiting Copenhagen, yet we observe that the encounters between the visitors and locals are limited in quantity and depth of interaction

We explore three key questions:

- (1) What constitutes social contact between locals and visitors?
- (2) how is social value produced between locals and visitors?
- (3) what is the relationship between context, quality and quantity of contact in terms of outcomes from social contact?

### Results

Friendliness of locals and a convivial atmosphere is among the best experiences for Chinese tourists visiting Copenhagen

It is evident that the social interactions between tourists and locals are brief and distanced:

*“... we didn’t have any interactions with the local people on purpose, but we smiled back if they smiled to us and had small talks when we went shopping. These were great experiences and we felt the people here are very warm.”*

This indicates:

- (1) For Chinese tourists visiting Copenhagen, the quantity of social contact is less important, as long as the perceived quality of the few social encounters is high
- (2) Little interaction is needed to establish what is perceived as high quality interaction

Experiencing the local lifestyle was also among the peak experiences for a number of interviewees. Keywords included: leisurely, safe, happy, livable, trust, care, educated, kid-friendly, healthy, stylish and free

*“The bike culture here is very great and people cycling very fast here. I felt very happy when I saw them biking and even want to try it myself. The bikes in China are chaos. Unlike here, there are specific bike lanes here. It’s very environmental-friendly.”*

The positive experience comes from gazing at the local people’s lifestyle, and in some cases imagining what it would be like to be part of it

This suggests that social value is created from cursory lifestyle participation or even imagined participation for Chinese tourists visiting Copenhagen

### Methodology

The study is based on 36 semi-structured mini-interviews with Chinese independent travelers visiting Copenhagen for the first time

Interviewee characteristics:

- The majority had previous travel experience in Europe
- About half stayed at Airbnb’s, the other half at hotels or hostels.
- One third were respectively in their 20s, in their 30s and between 40 and 50 years of age.
- 23 were female and, 12 were male.
- Average length of stay in Copenhagen was 4 days

The analysis followed established procedures for inductive analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Strauss, 1987), working recursively between data and existing theory until themes or patterns emerged

### Conclusions and implications

Positive social outcomes and tourist experiences may result from distant, brief and cursory encounters between tourists and visitors

Quantity of contact is less important than the (imagined?) quality of contact in the particular context (long-haul, culturally distant travelers, with specific expectations of friendliness and happiness of locals)

The findings suggest that social value concepts, such as conviviality, are based on erroneous assumptions about the depth of involvement and participation needed to achieve valuable experiences and feelings of conviviality

Although previous research on conviviality in tourism has shown that tourists go to other areas of cities and to local places such as supermarkets (Maitland, 2008, 2010; Maitland & Newman, 2008), it can be argued that their actual interactions with locals may be similarly distant and cursory

This suggests that our findings are perhaps more pronounced in the Chinese context, but not unique to it

Further research is needed to determine whether our findings apply outside the specific case

### References

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