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Constructing authenticity in coastal ecolodges: managerial narratives from Bushehr, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Prior research on authenticity in tourism has been dominated by tourist-centric lenses, giving relatively limited attention to supply-side actors. Addressing this conceptual gap, the present study investigates managerial narratives of authenticity construction in the under-researched context of coastal ecolodges in Bushehr Province, southern Iran. Drawing on the concepts of constructive and staged authenticity, it analyses how owners and managers produce marketable 'authentic' experiences for their guests. The findings show that managerial authenticity work clusters around material place cues, home-like hospitality, narrative and ritual, selective adaptation and two-layering, experiential education, and context-bound constraints. The study contributes to authenticity debates by offering a supply-side conceptualisation of authenticity as an ongoing accomplishment along a continuum from constructive authenticity to operational soft staging, with potential slippage into staged display.

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Authenticity; coastal ecolodges; managerial perspectives; Bushehr; Iran

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many travellers seek trips that are not only relaxing but also sustainable and 'authentic' (Peng et al., 2025). Ecotourism is often presented as one answer to this new demand, because it promises low-impact activities, support for local communities, and protection of natural areas (Fennell, 2007). Within this field, ecolodges are described as small-scale, nature-based accommodations that use local materials, employ local people, and offer programmes that connect visitors with the surrounding landscape and culture (Wearing & Neil, 2009; Weaver, 2008). In ecolodge marketing, the idea of an 'authentic' local experience is central: guests are invited to taste traditional food, stay in local architecture, and join activities presented as part of everyday life in the destination (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2016; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

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Research on ecotourism and ecolodges has examined topics such as service quality, visitor satisfaction, perceived authenticity, and environmental performance, frequently using quantitative models to link perceived authenticity with satisfaction and behavioural intentions (e.g. Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). At the same time, qualitative case studies and postgraduate theses from different regions show that ecolodges are also social and cultural spaces where managers make concrete choices about architecture, decoration, menus, activities, and narratives (Stronza, 2008; Wearing & McDonald, 2002). These choices highlight some aspects of local life and nature while silencing others, thereby packaging particular images of place and culture as products for visitors (Mkono, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). However, to the best of our knowledge, authenticity in ecolodge settings has received less attention from a managerial perspective.

Despite this growing body of work, there is still room for more qualitative research that explores authenticity in specific ecolodge contexts, especially outside the best-known international destinations. Much of the literature still focuses on famous heritage sites, urban tourism, or large-scale resort (Jamal & Hill, 2013; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Studies addressing authenticity in small, nature-based accommodations often treat it mainly as a survey-based variable, rather than as a process that emerges from everyday practices, stories, and interactions between managers and guests (Kim & Jamal, 2007).

In Iran, ecolodges are a rapidly growing yet understudied accommodation sector, primarily small and family-run (Salari & Murphy, 2023). Iranian scholars reported on the growth of ecolodges and issues such as the opportunities they create for local communities (e.g. Kuchaci Shalmani et al., 2025) and the challenges they face in terms of management, marketing, and policy (e.g. Pourtaheri et al., 2024), but they have rarely touched on issues of authenticity. In addition, studies use broad survey methods rather than detailed, interpretive approaches (e.g. Chogan, 2022) or concentrate on non-coastal regions (e.g. Dehghan Pour Farashah et al., 2025).

Bushehr Province, on the northern coast of the Persian Gulf, offers a compelling backdrop for exploring these questions. The region is known for its historic port city, palm groves, beaches, distinctive seafood and spicy cuisine, and a strong maritime identity. In recent years, a number of small ecolodges in and around Bushehr have begun attracting visitors seeking quiet stays near the sea, local food, and a sense of everyday coastal life. Many of these ecolodges use architectural elements inspired by traditional houses, serve regional dishes, and organise guided tours to nearby attractions, including mangrove forests.

Against this background, the present study explores the managerial construction of place-based authenticity in coastal ecolodges across Bushehr Province, southern Iran. It draws on constructive authenticity to analyse how ecolodge owners and managers negotiate, select, and combine elements of local culture and nature as coherent 'authentic' products (Honey, 2013). It also engages with staged authenticity to examine how tourism settings are organised through frontstage – backstage dynamics and how particular aspects of local life are deliberately foregrounded or downplayed for visitors (Žemla & Siwek, 2020). To address this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do ecolodge owners/managers in Bushehr construct and present authenticity as a marketable experience in their everyday operation?

RQ2. How do these practices reflect and negotiate constructive and staged authenticity under practical constraints?

2. Literature review

2.1. Ecolodge definition and characteristics

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) characterises eco-lodges as including three main components: conservation of neighbouring lands, benefits to local communities, and interpretation for both local populations and guests (Bricker et al., 2004). These three basic criteria are emphasised by multiple sources as key principles that any accommodation establishment must fulfil to be labelled an ecolodge (Idowu, 2021; Van der Merwe & Saayman, 2017). Sustainability is the most important aspect of an ecolodge, with these facilities designed to have minimal environmental impact and often presented as exclusive accommodations in non-urban, natural settings (Buonvivere, 2023). In practice, ecolodges are typically small-scale, locally owned businesses, often categorised as specialist accommodation similar to small hotels or guesthouses (Ghaith et al., 2019; Van der Merwe & Saayman, 2017). They offer natural resource-orientated activities and opportunities to learn about the environment, enriching ecotourists' experiences through additional services such as interpretation programmes and sense of place (Chogan, 2022; Sumanapala et al., 2017). However, case studies and reviews show that actual practices could vary and often reflect market pressures and investors' priorities (e.g. Fennell, 2007; Honey, 2013; Weaver, 2008).

Empirical studies on ecolodges across different regions have mainly concentrated on functional and economic dimensions. For example, research in Sri Lanka identifies visitors who seek accommodation in ecolodges (Sumanapala et al., 2017). A study from Egypt profiles ecolodge guests and evaluates service quality and satisfaction (Ghaith et al., 2019), while research in Nigeria highlights the socio-economic importance of an ecolodge for local employment, income generation, and community development (Idowu, 2021). Overall, this literature tends to see ecolodges primarily as products to be evaluated in terms of satisfaction or sustainability indicators. Less attention has been paid to how ecolodge owners and managers select, combine, and organise specific elements of local nature and culture as authentic experiences and how these choices relate to broader debates on constructive and staged authenticity.

2.2. Ecolodge expansion within Iran's ecotourism strategy

Iran has promoted ecotourism as a key strategy for rural and regional development because of the country's high diversity of landscapes, climates, and protected areas (Ghaderi et al., 2025). In this context, the ecolodge sector in Iran has undergone remarkable expansion over the past decade, transforming from a negligible accommodation option into a major component of the country's tourism infrastructure, even though the first ecolodges in Iran are not more than 15 years old (Chogan, 2022). Supported by this policy framework, government incentives alongside local entrepreneurship helped increase the number of licensed ecolodges from roughly 320 in 2017 to about 2201 by 2020, particularly in rural and peripheral provinces, and as a result, making them important vehicles for spreading tourism income and linking conservation with community development (Ghaderi, Butler, et al., 2022; Montazeri Shahtouri et al., 2022). Despite this rapid growth, however, Iran's ecolodge sector confronts substantial operational and regulatory challenges that threaten its sustainability. The fast expansion

of ecolodges has not always followed the required guidelines, creating fundamental issues in how these establishments are developed and operated. Previous research has identified several key problem areas, including limited government support, weak tourism laws and policies, geographical constraints, lack of knowledge, and local community perceptions (Irani et al., 2024).

2.3. *Authenticity in tourism*

Authenticity is a central idea in tourism in general, and especially in ecotourism and ecolodge settings. Early work by MacCannell (1973) argued that modern tourists travel in search of 'real' life in other cultures but usually encounter carefully prepared front-stage settings that only simulate local everyday life, a process he called staged authenticity. Cohen (1988) later showed that authenticity is not a fixed property of an object or place; it depends on the changing meanings that different tourists attach to what they see and do. Wang (1999) systematised these debates by distinguishing objective authenticity (based on originality), constructive authenticity (based on socially agreed meanings), and existential authenticity, which focuses on feelings of being true to oneself during travel rather than on the 'realness' of cultural objects. Subsequent works have reinforced the view that authenticity is multi-dimensional, negotiated and relational, rather than a simple binary between real and fake (e.g. Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

In nature-based tourism and ecotourism, authenticity has been discussed in relation to landscapes, ecosystems, and environmental values. Research distinguishes between natural and cultural authenticity, showing that tourists evaluate both the naturalness of environments and the cultural meanings attached to them, and that these dimensions shape destination image, satisfaction, and perceived value (Li & Li, 2022). Other studies link perceived authenticity to revisit intention, environmentally responsible behaviour, and quality of life, highlighting its behavioural, emotional, and well-being dimensions in nature-based experiences (Campón-Cerro et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Beyond being treated as a perceived attribute of sites, settings, or performances, authenticity can also be understood as a source of experiential value that is co-created through tourists' active engagement, participation, and reflection (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2018).

Within this broader field, ecolodges are often presented as flagship products where authenticity, sustainability, and local benefit should come together. Mehta (2010) argues that authenticity in ecolodges is multidimensional, encompassing the physical setting, environmentally responsible operational practices, and social relations such as local ownership and community partnerships. At the same time, recent reviews note that empirical studies, which explicitly link authenticity to ecolodge experiences, remain limited, especially in emerging markets. In this vein, Varmazyari et al. (2022) suggest that authentic ecolodge development is more likely when entrepreneurs are deeply embedded in the local community, strongly place-attached, and orientated toward direct host–guest interaction. Also, Karimi and Asgharzadeh (2025) conceptualise authenticity as one of several key dimensions, along with service quality, perceived value, and satisfaction, in explaining guest experiences in ecolodges. It indicates that perceived authenticity is now being incorporated into models of service evaluation and behavioural intention in ecotourism.

Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain. Many studies of authenticity in tourism focus on cultural and heritage attractions or popular ecotourism destinations and typically measure authenticity through standardised survey scales. However, research on ecolodges has mostly examined service quality, environmental performance, entrepreneurship, or community impacts, while paying less attention to how authenticity is constructed and narrated in these settings. Even where authenticity is included in quantitative models of ecolodge experience, it is treated as a latent variable rather than explored in depth. In addition, most empirical work on ecotourism authenticity concentrates on tourists' perceptions rather than on supply-side actors and tends to focus on well-known destinations, whereas small, family-run ecolodges in coastal settings and in Global South contexts such as Iran are rarely studied.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Case study context

Bushehr Province is located on the northern coast of the Persian Gulf in southern Iran. Its capital, Bushehr city, has long been an important port and gateway for maritime trade and cultural exchange between Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, and the wider Indian Ocean world (Derafshi, 2024). The old urban fabric of Bushehr is characterised by narrow alleys, shaded courtyards, and houses adapted to hot and humid coastal conditions, giving the city a distinctive coastal identity within Iran. Traditional houses in the historic quarters often use coral and sedimentary stone, thick walls, verandas, and wind catchers to regulate heat and humidity (Motealleh et al., 2018). This architectural setting provides an appropriate context for contemporary small-scale tourism and for ecolodges that draw on images of 'local' and 'authentic' Bushehri life.

Bushehr Province also has natural landscapes of high value for coastal and nature-based tourism. Recent geoheritage research has identified key natural sites, such as Nayband National Marine Park, Asaluyeh mangrove forests, Helle wetland, Jashak salt dome, and several protected areas, as among the province's most valuable locations for geotourism and nature tourism (Derafshi, 2024). For example, the Nayband protected area includes around 390 hectares of mangrove forests, representing the largest remaining stand north of 27 degrees in Southwest Asia and part of Iran's first national marine park. These ecosystems support diverse bird and marine life and are increasingly used for boat tours and ecotourism activities (Jafari & Rahnama, 2018).

3.2. Research design

This study uses a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with owners and managers of ecolodges. Since there were no official statistics or comprehensive register of ecolodges in Bushehr, we first constructed a sampling frame using local tourism networks and systematic online searches to identify accommodations marketing themselves as 'ecolodges'. This process yielded 72 ecolodges across Bushehr Province, and we attempted to contact all of them by telephone. Some managers did not respond, and some declined participation; ultimately, 24 owners/managers participated in the study. The achieved sample captures a meaningful range of managerial experience and ecolodge

profiles, including variation in gender, age, capacity, and years of operation (see Appendix 1).

Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, allowing emerging patterns to inform judgements about sample adequacy. Saturation was assessed iteratively after successive interviews. Specifically, we considered whether new data generated substantively new first-order codes, required revision of existing code groups, or changed the developing thematic structure in relation to the research questions. By interview 19, no new first-order codes of analytical relevance were identified. Interviews 20–24 mainly added examples, nuance, and variation within already established categories rather than generating new themes. These later interviews were retained to increase confidence in the stability and breadth of the thematic interpretation.

All interviews were jointly conducted by two researchers, one originally from Bushehr and the other from elsewhere in Iran. This brought a combined insider–outsider perspective. The Bushehr-born researcher contributed cultural familiarity, accent ease, and knowledge of local references, which helped build rapport and enabled locally grounded expression. At the same time, this insider proximity risked leaving certain meanings or practices taken for granted and therefore insufficiently probed. The second researcher was less embedded in local assumptions and therefore better positioned to question familiarised accounts, seek clarification, and notice culturally loaded terms or practices that participants passed over quickly. The insider–outsider composition also informed interpretation beyond the interview stage. The Bushehr-born researcher transcribed the interviews and added brief explanatory notes for local terms, expressions, and culturally specific references. These contextual annotations helped the researchers involved in analysis interpret regional meanings more accurately and reduced the risk of misreading locally embedded practices.

All interviews took place by telephone at pre-arranged times during winter 2025. They were conducted in Persian, typically lasted 15–50 min, and were audio-recorded with participants' permission before being transcribed verbatim. The research team then translated the transcripts into English, aiming to preserve meaning and culturally specific terms rather than produce literal word-for-word renderings.

The interviewers also had recently stayed as guests at a coastal ecolodge in Bushehr and joined a mangrove and beach tour. This preliminary, small-scale participant observation helped the researchers familiarise themselves with the setting and refine the interview guides (Appendix 2), but it was not treated as a separate data set.

3.3. Data analysis

To identify and interpret meaningful patterns in the data, thematic analysis was employed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), it often entails six steps, including familiarising oneself with the data, creating preliminary codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and labelling themes, and preparing the report. MAXQDA software was used to analyse the data.

Two of the researchers read and re-read the transcripts during the early stages of analysis to become familiar with the data and to identify recurring issues relevant to the research questions. Open coding was then undertaken in line with the research questions. Coding was iterative rather than fixed from the outset; as the analysis progressed,

codes were revisited, compared across interviews, and, where necessary, merged, split, renamed, or regrouped. Codes were then classified on the basis of their conceptual and semantic relationships and organised into broader code groups. This process allowed the researchers to move back and forth between individual extracts, initial codes, and broader code groups, thereby making the development of themes more transparent. A network of code groups was subsequently developed, from which primary themes and their related sub-codes and sub-themes were identified (Ghaderi, Aslani, et al., 2022). Following accepted guidelines for thematic analysis, two researchers worked together to construct themes through iterative inductive coding and continuous comparison throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than treating coding as a one-off procedure, the two researchers discussed coding decisions, compared interpretations, and refined thematic boundaries throughout the analysis. When differences in interpretation arose, they returned to the original Persian extracts, compared relevant passages across interviews, and revised code groupings or thematic boundaries until a coherent shared reading was reached. Eventually, we used the concepts of constructive and staged authenticity as sensitising lenses to interpret and refine the themes without forcing data into pre-set categories (see Figure 1).

4. Findings

4.1. Material place cues

This theme shows how managers mobilise the natural setting, architectural heritage, material culture, and local food to make Bushehr's coastal identity tangible and ground authenticity in continuity and everyday use (Figure 2).

Across most accounts, managers first tie authenticity to coastal nature, a distinctive ecology, and related activities. Here, nature is not merely landscape; it is presented as the core content of the experience and the ecolodge's key differentiator. In some cases, nature moves beyond the external scenery and becomes materialised in the lodge's design – for instance, through planting native species in the courtyard: *'In old houses there were always palm trees, and now there are palms as well... I have about ten palms inside the house... and outside we planted two types of trees that existed in the past ...'* (R7). Similarly, another manager turns proximity to the sea into a lived part of staying there and *'brings nature into'* the accommodation experience: *'Our complex*

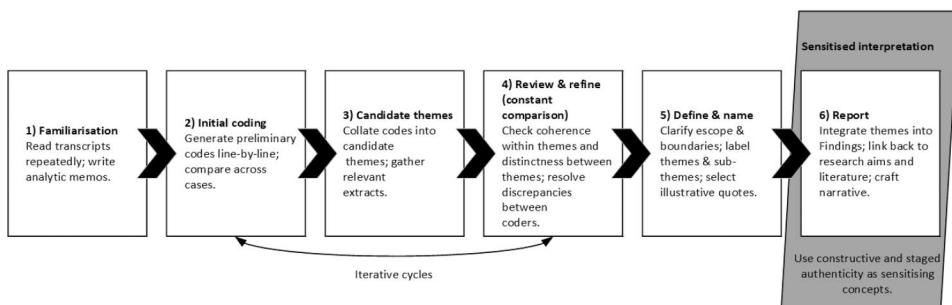


Figure 1. Workflow of the analysis procedures.

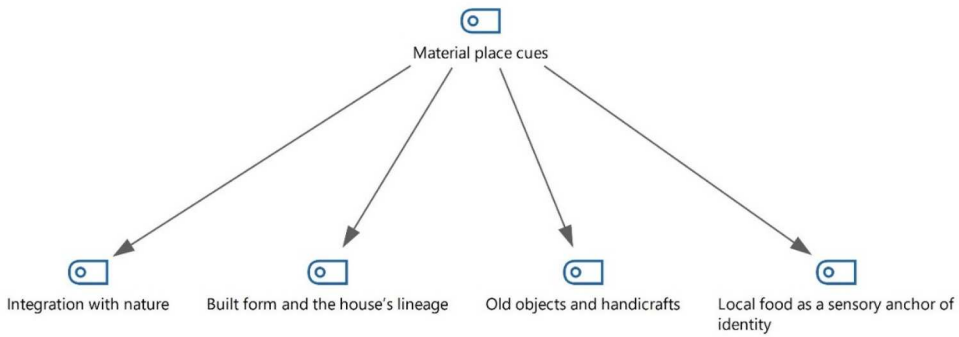


Figure 2. Sub-themes of material place cues.

is close to the beach ... When you sit on the terrace, it's as if the sea is in your yard ... I placed windows facing the shore ... like an animation ... (R13). Through such practices, local nature shifts from a destination attraction to part of the authentic product itself.

In many accounts, a sense of place is bound up with the region's architecture and historic fabric: *'... old houses, cobblestoned alleys, verandas and wooden doors ... the narrow alleys are worth seeing'* (R15). Some view the restoration of an ancestral home as an authenticity carrier in itself, linking it to memory and lineage: *'We set up the ecolodge in our father's house ... I wanted to keep my father's name alive after his death ...'* (R12). However, the quality of reconstruction is not uniform, and this variation highlights differences in how authenticity is realised. In some cases, managers attempt to recreate Bushehr's architectural cues within a new structure: *'The rooms have a concrete structure, but we covered the façade with mud plaster ... wooden ceilings ... wood-look doors with coloured glass ... We also built two windcatchers, but they are symbolic windcatchers'* (R17). By contrast, other narratives stress skill-based, faithful restoration: *'We have a wood-restoration workshop ... We restored 100-150-years-old wooden doors and windows ourselves ... We made some based on old patterns and with old wood'* (R4). Elsewhere, reconstruction remains largely surface-level: *'We built one new but in an old style ... with wooden ceilings and PVC doors with a wood pattern ...'* (R12). This range suggests that material authenticity is stronger when architectural cues are supported by skilled restoration, material and historical continuity.

Handicrafts are another recurring carrier of authenticity: *'Another Bushehri experience is handicrafts'* (R2). In some lodges, handicrafts are sold as goods: *'We also have a handicrafts shop ... Everyone who has come has not left without buying souvenirs'* (R7). In other narratives, authenticity is stronger when handicrafts enter everyday use – moving beyond décor or souvenirs to become tools of living: *'When handicrafts enter the ecolodge, they become functional ... woven mats ... woven plates and baskets for bread and cutlery ... ceiling lamps ...'* (R4).

Some managers also assemble a kind of material archive by collecting functional objects from the past: *'We turned one part into a museum ... old clothes ... lighting items, cooking tools, and old farming equipment ...'* (R6). In some cases, hosts take on an interpretive role and connect objects to lived history: *'... I put old items like 'Dool' [leather well bucket], date baskets, and fishing tools in the museum, and if anyone*

wants, I explain ... this is how people used to live' (R2). Occasionally, limited, situational performances emerge to meet tourist curiosity: '[A group of] Tourists were curious to know how people dressed in the past ... We asked an elderly man for help ... He came at 'Nowruz' [Iranian New Year] and wore those clothes ... It was very well received' (R1). Here, the key distinction is whether objects and handicrafts retain function and continuity or are arranged mainly to be looked at.

Food is one of the most salient carriers of authenticity – both as a memorable experience, 'They come here for local and traditional foods' (R24), and as a marker of regional identity: '... eating traditional foods ... 'Qelie-mahi' [fish stew], shrimp pilaf ... It evokes the pleasure of being 'southern' (R1). Yet the data show that this sensory component is fragile and can be removed or outsourced under economic pressure: 'The neighbours – five or six women ... We send their phone numbers ... They take the menus and place orders' (R4). This indicates that even under constraints, authenticity can become distributed – that is, food experiences move from the lodge to local networks. For some guests, this shift may bring food closer to home-style cooking logics and everyday routines (available ingredients, seasonality, and family tastes), potentially strengthening perceived authenticity. At the same time, this outsourcing may gradually become semi-standardised through fixed menus and ordering routines – amounting to a form of delegated staging.

More broadly, this theme shows how managers make authenticity visible through selective curation, deciding which aspects of coastal life are restored, explained, functionalised, outsourced, or aestheticised for visitors. Constructive authenticity takes form through coastal nature, vernacular built form, handicrafts, functional objects, and local food. Together, these make place tangible and experienceable while conveying local specificity and continuity. Soft staging appears when such cues are lightly designed and contextualised to guide attention and participation without severing them from everyday practice. This can be seen in spatial framing (terraces and views), heritage corners with brief explanation, and the functional integration of crafts into everyday use. Through the staged authenticity lens, the same cues become frontstage props when they are reduced to decorative signs or stripped of function and lived continuity. For example, this occurs through surface restoration, decontextualised handicrafts, or standardised offerings of local cuisine. Under such conditions, what is framed as authenticity becomes a mediated outcome shaped by visitor appeal and commodification pressures.

4.2. Home-like hospitality

This theme shows how managers shape authenticity relationally: warmth and everyday co-living foster closeness, while managed intimacy, trust-building, and varying degrees of host involvement define the terms of that closeness (Figure 3).

Some managers present warmth as the core asset of the experience: 'The people of our village are very warm and kind' (R9). In some accounts, relationships even become durable friendships and a sense of 'becoming family': 'A tourist said, 'Today you're our lunch guests' ... They had cooked 'Ghormeh Sabzi' [herb stew] ... Many of our friends become part of the family because of how we treat them' (R4). Here, managers express authenticity through social closeness and personalised hospitality – what guests

experience as a key difference from hotels. This extends to food practices too, especially when guests enter everyday local networks: *'They go to local people's homes [for food], and a table is laid for them ... like someone going to a party in that house ... They spend hours, chat, and become friends'* (R4).

Another set of narratives shows that home-like is produced through everyday living and guests' natural participation. One manager describes the lodge as a homestay and emphasises being non-performative: *'We live here, and our lodge is a homestay ... chickens and roosters in the yard ... a clay oven ... A guest arrived while bread was being baked and ate that bread ... We tried not to make anything staged'* (R14). Other accounts similarly define the ecolodge–hotel distinction on this basis: *'A hotel has different amenities ... , but someone who comes to an ecolodge is seeking the feeling and the connection with the host'* (R2). Authenticity here is closer to short-term co-living than to service consumption.

Alongside intimacy, managers show that home-like does not endure without boundaries and co-living management. Some deliberately use 'house rules' to move away from a 'hotel-like' atmosphere and toward cohabitation: *'We want guests to follow the rules of the house ... For example, take off their shoes at the entrance ... We even changed the logo to 'ecolodge home' ... So, the guest feels it's a relative's home ... We become housemates for a few days'* (R4). These rules can be read as soft staging – not to fabricate a show, but to guide experience toward respect, order, and workable co-living.

Some managers also frame care and responsiveness as integral to home-like, where host availability strengthens safety and trust without constant intrusion: *'Even if a guest stays for a few days, I don't leave them; I stay in my own dedicated cabin so that if they run into a problem, I can solve it'* (R23). Cleanliness is likewise not only a service feature but also part of the host's moral image and a trust mechanism: *'Because it is traditional and clean, many travellers like the space to be clean'* (R22). Hosts explain that seeing cleanliness and the host's presence quickly reduces the feeling of being a stranger and facilitates relationship-building: *'When they see the place and the cleanliness, they feel more at ease, and within the first few hours that feeling of being a stranger disappears'* (R5).

Finally, the data show that home-like is not the only dominant model; styles of hosting vary. Against the cohabitation/active-host model, one manager defines desirable experience as guest independence: *'I have created an environment ... I'm not involved ... I provide everything to the guest so they can experience it themselves ... I'm not present in the lodge'* (R13). This suggests relational authenticity ranges from close relationships to enabling independent experience, with managers calibrating intimacy based on style, target guests, and constraints.

In these managerial accounts, constructive authenticity is articulated relationally through home-like hospitality, warmth, and care embedded in everyday interactions and guests' lived experience. Soft staging appears when intimacy is gently managed and trust is built through house rules, cleanliness, and host availability. Slippage may occur when boundary work turns into control or when warmth becomes a repeatable performance for the market, pushing the experience toward a 'hotel-like' script rather than negotiated co-living. More than just a description of warm hosting, this theme reveals authenticity as a form of managed intimacy. Managers seek to create a domestic atmosphere that feels personal and unforced, yet this apparent spontaneity is often

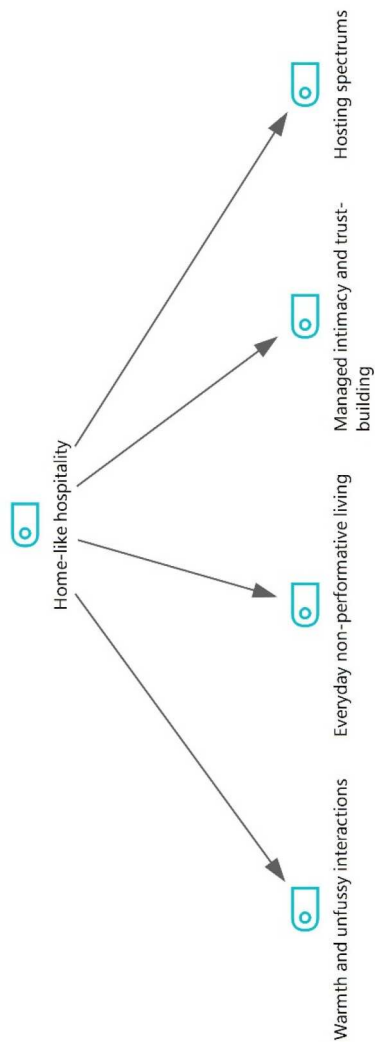


Figure 3. Sub-themes of home-like hospitality.

carefully bounded by service expectations, house rules, and commercial responsibility. This domesticity becomes part of the value proposition, while the host retains control over the terms on which guests may enter everyday life. The result is a tension in which home-like relations are both enacted and regulated. Thus, experiences presented as natural and sincere may still depend on subtle orchestration.

4.3. Narrative and ritual

This theme shows managers shaping authenticity through locally grounded narrative and ritual practices that make local memories accessible and enable dialogue and participation (Figure 4).

In some accounts, narrative authenticity emerges from real conversations and local participation, where the story is not just content but an interactive act that draws guests into local relational networks. One manager involves guests in a family-local story: *‘There are some historical narratives in the region called ‘Khalu Hossein Dashti’, who is my spouse’s grandfather ... and when the audience comes, we involve them in these stories; they find it very interesting and become eager’* (R1). Another turns inviting village elders into a participatory storytelling setting: *‘I invite village elders and old men ... They come, and we have an evening gathering ... They talk about old wedding rituals and their occupations’* (R20). In such moments, meaning is produced in situ through questions, reminiscence, and relationship-building.

Some managers activate narratives through carefully designed cues and ‘clues’ in the space, nudging guests toward curiosity and discovery. Naming rooms after local elders is one such strategy, turning narrative into an environmental cue and a conversation starter: *‘I have put the names of old locals on the rooms so the traveller becomes curious ... We sit with them and talk about agriculture/livestock and fishing memories ... I used to be a fisherman myself’* (R17). Here, the narrative is neither fully improvised nor fully scripted: it is activated through design and then expanded through real dialogue.

Beyond storytelling, cultural performances are described in some narratives as the most memorable part of the experience. These performances tend to be more

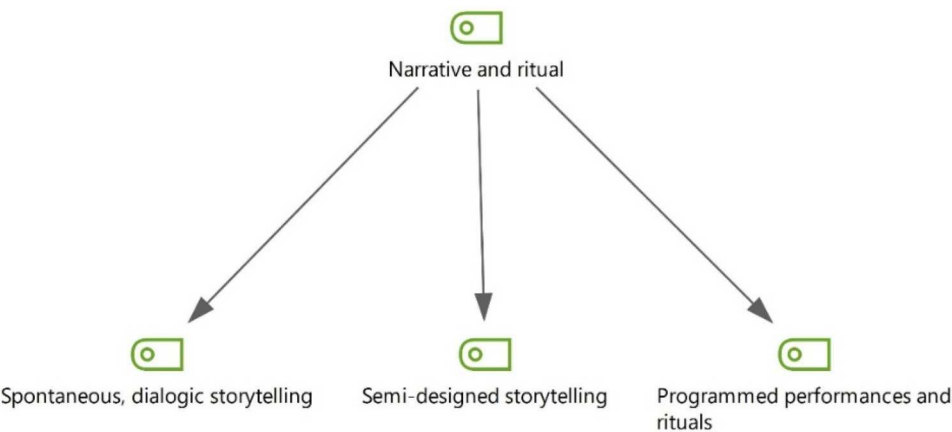


Figure 4. Sub-themes of narrative and ritual.

programmed and closer to staging, yet they can still become meaningful. One manager describes ‘Khayyam-khani’ with Bushehri music and ‘Ney-anban’ [bagpipes]: ‘*Khayyam-khani*’ is a reading accompanied by the heat and passion of Bushehr, performed with music and the ‘Ney-anban’, and it is very uplifting’ (R1). Elsewhere, the ‘Hana Bandan’ [henna ceremony] ritual is offered as a tangible participatory experience: ‘*We introduce ‘Hana Bandan’ ... Some tourists want a henna design on their hands ... We coordinate with a woman, and she does it*’ (R17). Programmed delivery can increase presentability and attractiveness, but it also carries the risk of becoming merely performative and detached from everyday life.

This theme suggests that narratives and rituals serve as managerial tools for organising meaning, but the degree of design and repeatability shapes the direction they take. When stories and gatherings are co-produced through honest conversation, local participation, and relationship-building, they align with constructive authenticity. When narratives are activated through designed cues, such as names and spatial clues, and then expanded through dialogue, they represent soft staging that scaffolds meaning without displacing it. More broadly, this shows how managers shape authenticity through the selective mediation of cultural meaning. They decide which memories are foregrounded, who is invited to speak, and how visitors are drawn into acts of listening, curiosity, and participation. However, when cultural performances become highly repeatable and are delivered mainly for tourist consumption, they can slip toward staged authenticity. This becomes more likely when explanation and genuine participation fade, and presentability is gained at the cost of lived continuity. The boundary between constructive and staged authenticity is therefore not a rigid binary but a continuum from improvisation to script.

4.4. Selective adaptation and two-layering

This theme highlights managers’ efforts to sustain authenticity by balancing displayable tradition with unavoidable modernisation while responding to guest feedback and expectations (Figure 5).

Managers repeatedly stress that some elements cannot be traditionalised, especially where hygiene and comfort are concerned. A manager states: ‘*You can’t make toilets and bathrooms traditional ... They must have tiles and ceramics ...*’ (R23). Another noted: ‘*You can’t implement the old heating; we use gas heaters/air conditioners*’ (R14). Formal grading standards are also invoked as decision references, showing that backstage modernisation is sometimes not a choice but an institutional requirement: ‘*To get a rating [from the government], we put both Iranian-style and Western toilets inside the rooms ... In the past, toilets were shared in a corner of the yard ...*’ (R14). These accounts suggest that red lines define what can remain authentic in practice: symbolic and meaningful traditions can be preserved to some extent, but hygiene and comfort infrastructures are treated as non-negotiable.

Alongside standards, managers face diverse guest expectations and actively use feedback to fine-tune experience. One manager describes a feedback mechanism: ‘*I have a notebook where guests write the criticisms and suggestions they see in the lodge*’ (R13). Others mention small but significant changes made based on such feedback: ‘*We changed the floor mats ... At first the toilets had no flush, then we added it ... We paved the paths with stone and cement ... We reduced the spices [chilli] ...*’ (R7). Still,

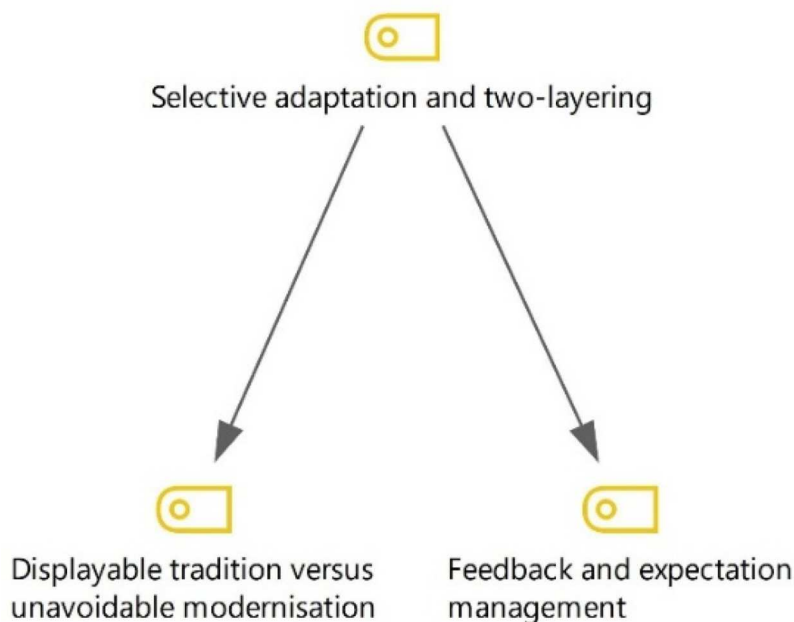


Figure 5. Sub-themes of selective adaptation and two-layering.

not all expectations can or should be met, and sometimes the boundary between ‘ecolodge’ and ‘hotel’ must be explained. One manager describes misunderstandings tied to low price and hotel-like expectations: ‘Some people think that because they paid a small amount, they should get hotel services ... They say, ‘Why don’t you provide breakfast?’ ... We say it costs extra ... Then they write negative reviews’ (R16). In response to this diversity, some managers segment the space and experience to host different groups simultaneously: ‘For some people, lizards are not a problem; some are afraid ... We designed the complex in two ways: one part for urban visitors on short visits, one part for experiencing traditional space ... So, we can host different groups’ (R11). These examples show that managers organise authenticity through micro-adjustments and managerial decisions.

From a constructive authenticity perspective, managers preserve culturally meaningful elements while defining red lines where hygiene, safety, and comfort cannot remain fully traditional. Two-layering operationalises this by protecting a distinctive frontstage of cultural atmosphere and place cues while absorbing modern requirements into the backstage. In many cases, these requirements are not simply managerial choices but externally imposed regulations, such as government grading criteria that push operators to install in-room bathrooms and specific sanitary facilities. This can constitute soft staging in an operational sense, because standards, micro-adjustments, and expectation management are used to keep the stay workable and liveable without fabricating a false reality. However, it slips toward staged authenticity when adaptation is driven mainly by ratings, reviews, or visibility, turning local difference into standardised acceptability. This can be seen, for example, when reducing spice moves from improving palatability to neutralising local flavour.

4.5. Experiential education

This theme highlights managerial efforts to shape authenticity through experiential learning with local knowledge and practices, while conservation education and norm-setting foster culturally and ecologically responsible conduct (Figure 6).

A major set of accounts emphasises experiential education, where guests participate in everyday activities and local skills rather than passively watching. One manager describes educational packages around palms and local food: *'We have a mat-weaving tour; a tour about the methods and customs of planting, harvesting, and Panir-e Nakhl [heart of palm]; and experiences of cooking local foods – Ranginak [traditional dessert] and halva – and baking delicious local breads'* (R7). Another describes learning from preparation through producing a simple item: *'... teaching how to climb palms with traditional tools ... planting palms and growth conditions ... explaining Panir-e Nakhl ... teaching kneading and baking bread ... teaching mat weaving from preparing materials to a simple weave'* (R14). Here, managers frame authenticity as a matter of knowing and doing: through touch and practice, guests experience the meaning and value of local skills.

In some cases, interpretation goes beyond local skills and becomes conservation education as part of an 'authentic' experience, especially where nature and wildlife are central place assets. One manager describes institutionalising education for school students: *'We set up a sustainable development school next to the ecolodge ... for several thousand students ... teaching environmental protection and how to deal with turtle eggs ... We combined astronomy with the environment and taught it'* (R1). Elsewhere, education is framed through events and collective participation: *'... environmental and cultural events ... focused on protecting humpback dolphins ... awareness-raising ... and beach clean-ups with tourists and the local community, especially children'* (R4). Here, managers link authenticity to protection, suggesting that a credible experience is possible only if the host environment and heritage are not harmed.

Some education takes the form of preventive norm-setting: before arrival or during the stay, hosts explain rules for cultural respect and environmental care. One manager

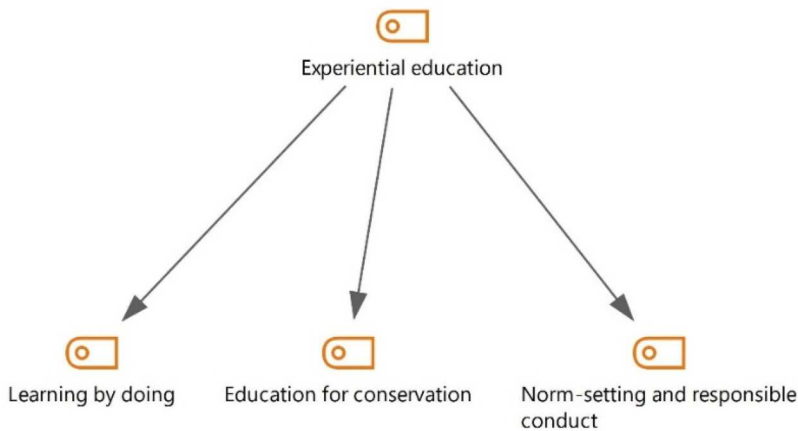


Figure 6. Sub-themes of experiential education.

says, *‘Before they come, we tell them to observe local norms ... Dress should not be strange ... Don’t leave litter in the palm grove ... Don’t play loud music because it’s a bird habitat’* (R14). This could be read as preaching or controlling guests, but in the data’s logic, it functions more as a condition of possibility for authentic experience: place-based authenticity remains viable only if guest behaviour aligns with cultural and ecological sensitivities.

In these managerial accounts, authenticity takes form through experiential, skill-based interpretation that lets guests understand place through doing, touching, and participation. When education is designed to guide responsible conduct and protect local assets, it functions as soft staging by making authentic experience viable through clear expectations and care. Managers shape what visitors are expected to notice, practise, value, and respect, linking authenticity not only to experiencing place but also to being taught how to engage with it appropriately. What emerges, then, is a guided form of authenticity in which local knowledge, ecological care, and behavioural expectations are translated into visitor learning. This can deepen engagement when participation remains meaningful and place-based. However, it can slip toward staged authenticity when activities become routinised packages delivered mainly for presentability or when guidance is communicated in overly prescriptive ways that reduce dialogue and shared understanding.

4.6. Context-bound constraints

This theme shows how climatic seasonality, economic pressure, ineffective support, and weak oversight constrain and reshape the forms of authenticity that managers can sustain in practice (Figure 7).

Some managers describe a short operating season and the direct impact of climate on experience design. As a result, the ‘time window for offering authenticity’ is limited to a few months and activities must be planned around heat and prolonged inactivity: *‘We are closed for six months of the year ... Because of the heat we have no activities ...’* (R10). Another manager adds, *‘Since this area is hot in that season [summer], nobody comes to our region’* (R24). These conditions turn local experience from a continuous package into a seasonal product and push managers toward forced selectivity in activities and services.

Narratives show that institutions and support policies can become sources of friction and mistrust rather than facilitation, especially around loans, financial support, and allocation mechanisms. One manager explains how an unfulfilled loan promise forced them to spend personal funds, while the support received covered only a limited share of restoration needs: *‘That amount was not enough, and the building work did not finish ... They promised a loan ... I spent from my own budget, and they did not follow through ... The heritage loan went to mud-plastering, paving the yard, and building a garden bed ...’* (R24). Another account links the issue to perceived rent-seeking/inequality in loan distribution, where some units received loans despite minimal, cosmetic changes, while the speaker could not obtain one: *‘Some places, as ecolodges, with connections got loans from the Cultural Heritage Organisation, although they are nothing like an ecolodge ... They just covered their rooms with mud plaster ... but I couldn’t get a loan’* (R3). These accounts show that authenticity is not always a matter of cultural choice or managerial

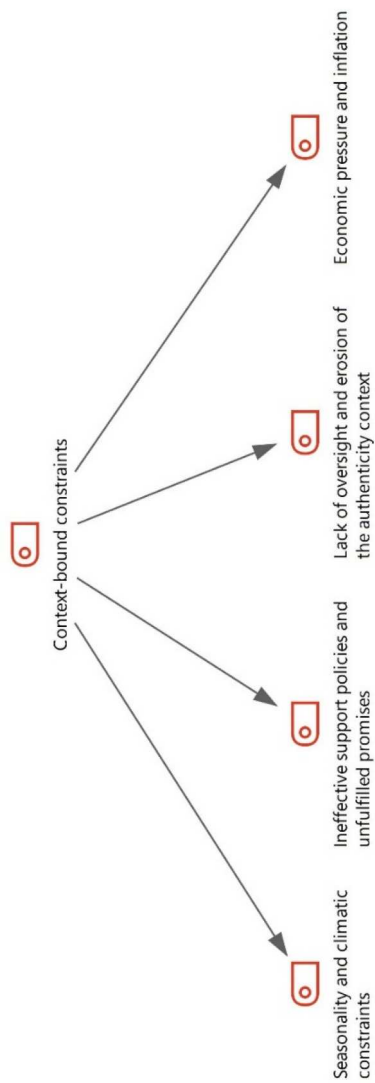


Figure 7. Sub-themes of context-bound constraints.

taste; it is shaped through negotiation with support structures, administrative constraints, and perceived institutional (in)justice – affecting investment, restoration, and experience delivery.

In addition to ineffective policies, the lack of oversight can weaken the very fabric and landscape that underpin place-based authenticity. One respondent describes the demolition of old houses and replacement by modern multi-storey buildings, reflecting this change in guest experience and questioning: *‘Due to lack of supervision, the village fabric has been destroyed ... Old houses were demolished, and modern multi-storey buildings replaced them ... Until two years ago, it was pristine, but now construction has increased ... Guests ask, ‘Where did that beautiful village go?’* (R23). In such conditions, managers may be forced to preserve authenticity more through narrative, representation, or selected fragments of place than through the integrity of the surrounding environment.

Nearly all respondents mention financial constraints that directly affect the ability to respond to feedback and improve services: *‘Guests pointed out shortcomings, but financially/time-wise it wasn’t possible ... We said thank you ... We pretended they were teaching us ... like pillows, tables/chairs ...’* (R5). Beyond rising costs, price volatility also makes planning and delivery difficult; one manager says about seafood: *‘The price of fish changes moment by moment ... One or two days before ... We announce the food price ...’* (R3). At the peak of inflation, some managers remove or outsource parts of the experience to keep it affordable and control costs – decisions that redraw the boundary between hospitality and economic survival: *‘The price of breakfast has become six times higher. We have to remove breakfast or tell them to settle directly with the person who prepares the food’* (R17). Here, authenticity becomes not a complete package but a ‘viable’ experience – minimal, adaptive, and resource-dependent.

This theme shows that managerial authenticity work does not unfold under neutral conditions but under uneven material and institutional constraints. When operators adapt to seasonality, inflation, and institutional constraints by prioritising what can be maintained and meaningfully delivered, authenticity takes a constructive form as a viable and place-grounded experience. These pressures can also lead to a workability-orientated reconfiguration of the guest experience, such as seasonal packaging, price communication, and outsourced provisioning. In operational terms, this functions as soft staging in an operational sense, keeping the stay workable without claiming to reproduce everyday life in full. The risk of staged authenticity increases when constraints and weak oversight erode the surrounding fabric and operators compensate through cosmetic upgrades, symbolic replicas, or routinised outsourced provision that prioritises presentability over lived continuity. Overall, what emerges here is an authenticity that is conditional rather than freely chosen.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Managerial narratives reveal that authenticity in Bushehr’s coastal ecolodges is not a static trait delivered to guests, but rather an ongoing accomplishment. As a heuristic model of managerial authenticity work, [Figure 8](#) synthesises the six themes and their specific mechanisms into a continuum from constructive authenticity to staged authenticity. Furthermore, by clarifying the intermediate mode of soft staging, it shows that

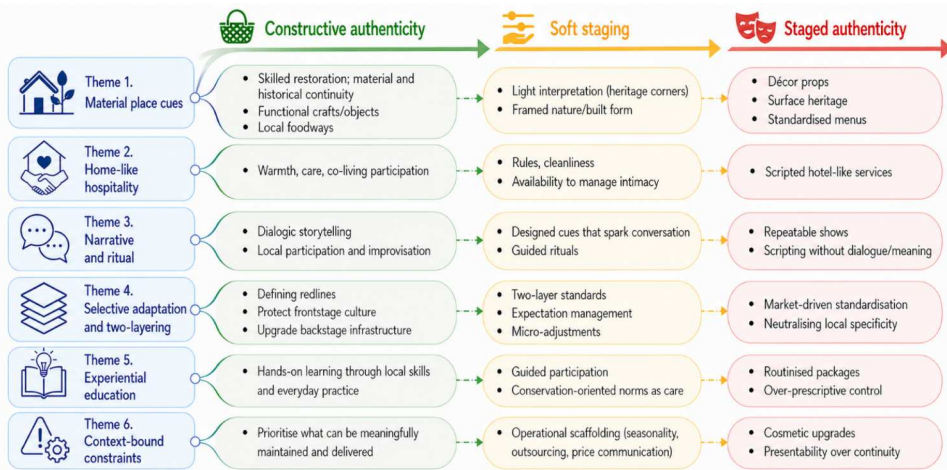


Figure 8. A continuum of managerial authenticity construction in Bushehr's coastal ecolodges.

authenticity is neither simply preserved nor lost, but variably organised across themes under distinct practical and institutional conditions. Unlike constructive authenticity, which rests more directly on lived continuity, co-presence, function, and locally grounded meaning, soft staging, like staged authenticity, involves deliberate managerial mediation.

However, what distinguishes soft staging from staged authenticity is not the mere presence of managerial intervention, but the role and consequences of that intervention. In soft staging, mediation remains supportive: it responds to practical demands of hospitality while organising access to local difference without displacing it. As a result, local specificity, unevenness, and embeddedness remain visible, and visitors still encounter authenticity through dialogue, participation, and context-sensitive engagement. In staged authenticity, by contrast, mediation becomes increasingly substitutive: rather than helping visitors engage with lived difference under real conditions, it domesticates, standardises, and aestheticises that difference into a more scripted, repeatable, and performance-centred display. The distinction, then, lies not in whether managers intervene, but in whether intervention sustains local difference in workable form or overrides it through display.

This pattern is consistent with constructive authenticity as a socially produced meaning that depends on shared interpretation and lived continuity rather than objective originality (Wang, 1999). It also points to the limitations of approaches that leave the material and operational grounding of authenticity under-specified (Cohen, 1988; Mkono, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). At the same time, the Bushehr case clarifies that stronger material authenticity depends not on the presence of visible cues per se, but on whether those cues remain supported by craft, function, and continuity, as in skill-based restoration and functional crafts. Without such grounding, the same cues may slip into surface treatments and detachable signs.

The findings also refine staged authenticity debates by demonstrating that staging in ecolodge settings often takes a low-intensity, operational form. Following MacCannell's insight that tourism involves frontstage arrangements that organise access and visibility

(MacCannell, 1973, 2013), Bushehr managers frequently use soft staging to make home-like co-living workable. House rules, calibrated boundaries, cleanliness, and host availability help build trust and reduce friction without necessarily fabricating a false reality.

Similarly, narrative practices range along a continuum from co-produced storytelling with locals to designed cues that scaffold curiosity and dialogue – soft staging, and finally, to repeatable performances that risk detaching from everyday life as participation and explanation fade (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). This also suggests that authenticity in ecolodges cannot be reduced to the presence of culturally meaningful signs or performances alone. Instead, it depends on the extent to which visitors are drawn into dialogue, participation, and situated engagement. This aligns with the view advanced by Ramkissoon and Uysal (2018), who conceptualise authenticity as a source of co-created experiential value. In this sense, staged authenticity is not a simple synonym for ‘fake’; it becomes problematic only at the point of slippage where presentability begins to replace lived continuity and relationship-based meaning (Mkono, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012).

At the same time, the Bushehr case indicates that constructivist discussions can remain too symbolic if they do not account for the material and operational conditions through which authenticity becomes credible in accommodation settings. Here, authenticity is not convincing simply because local signs are recognisable or culturally resonant; it is convincing when those signs remain tied to skilled restoration, functional use, everyday practice, and contextual continuity. In this respect, the findings extend the constructivist account advanced by Wang (1999) by showing that, in ecolodges, shared meaning alone is insufficient and that symbolic plausibility must also be materially and operationally sustained.

A particularly revealing mechanism is selective adaptation through two-layering, which separates non-negotiable infrastructures from culturally salient frontstage meaning. Managers define red lines around hygiene, safety, and comfort while working to keep distinctiveness in the cultural atmosphere, objects, and hosting style. This helps explain how ecolodges can align with widely cited expectations that ecolodges combine comfort, interpretation, and responsible practice with local distinctiveness (Mehta, 2010; Van der Merwe & Saayman, 2017; Wearing & Neil, 2009; Weaver, 2008). However, the findings challenge idealised assumptions in the ecolodge literature that sustainability, local benefit, comfort, and authenticity naturally reinforce one another (Bricker et al., 2004; Buonvivere, 2023). In practice, these elements are often held together through compromise, selective retention, and boundary work and may pull against one another as much as they cohere.

Finally, the Bushehr case foregrounds context-bounded authenticity by showing how climate seasonality, inflation, financing, and weak oversight materially condition what can be restored, maintained, and offered. These constraints can fragment authenticity into viable and selective experiences, sometimes redistributing authenticity through local networks (e.g. outsourced food provisioning), while also increasing the risk of cosmetic substitutions when the surrounding fabric erodes. This supports ecotourism scholarship emphasising that tourism outcomes depend on governance, community relations, and enabling conditions beyond the enterprise level (Fennell, 2007; Honey, 2013; Weaver, 2008). This is especially salient in Iran’s fast-expanding but operationally constrained ecolodge context (Irani et al., 2024; Salari & Murphy, 2023).

However, the Bushehr evidence also extends this literature by showing that authenticity in small-scale tourism should not be treated solely as a symbolic, perceptual, or experiential issue. The continuum model is useful because it shows that movement toward soft staging or staged display is not driven only by managerial preference or tourist demand but also by uneven material and institutional conditions.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, the study contributes to authenticity debates by demonstrating the analytical value of a supply-side perspective. By foregrounding managerial narratives, it shows that authenticity in ecolodge settings is not simply perceived by visitors but also actively selected, framed, and organised by those who design and manage the experience. In this respect, the study shifts attention from authenticity as an outcome of tourist interpretation alone to authenticity as a form of managerial work, thereby highlighting how marketability, hospitality, and place-based meaning are negotiated in practice.

Second, the study advances authenticity debates by conceptualising soft staging as a distinct intermediate mode between constructive authenticity and staged authenticity. Rather than treating managerial mediation as inherently corrosive, the study shows that low-intensity forms of framing, guidance, explanation, and boundary-setting can support authenticity when they organise access to local difference without displacing its practical, relational, and contextual grounding. This moves the discussion beyond a simple real/fake binary and offers a more processual account of how authenticity is organised, calibrated, and potentially destabilised in small-scale tourism settings.

Third, the study emphasises context-bounded authenticity by showing that, in this small-scale tourism context, what can be sustained as authentic is conditioned by material and institutional factors, including climate, governance, infrastructure, and economic capacity. The findings highlight the importance of analysing authenticity in relation to the practical circumstances under which local difference is organised, maintained, and adjusted.

5.2. Practical implications

Our findings have implications for different stakeholders. For ecolodge operators, the findings suggest practical ways to organise authenticity work in everyday operations. Material place cues (e.g. restoration, handicrafts, and heritage corners) tend to be most meaningful when tied to use, practice, and brief explanation rather than treated as décor. Home-like hospitality can remain a distinctive asset when intimacy is managed through clear boundaries, including house rules, spatial demarcation, and respectful co-living. Narrative elements work best when they are dialogic and situational, while more structured performances benefit from contextualisation that links them to local life. Two-layering – separating non-negotiable standards (hygiene and safety, often shaped by external regulations) from culturally salient frontstage elements and explaining this logic to guests – can reduce expectation mismatch without hollowing out place-based meaning. When offered, experiential education can foster authenticity by inviting participation and care for local skills, ecology, and norms. A further practical

implication is the importance of expectation management. In comparable small-scale accommodation settings, operators may reduce dissatisfaction and protect place-based meaning by explaining more clearly what an ecolodge experience includes, what it does not, and why certain boundaries or adaptations are necessary.

The findings also have implications for DMOs. They indicate that DMOs should function as intermediaries that institutionalise authenticity work at the destination scale. DMOs can translate situated managerial practices into guidelines that integrate material cues, narrative mediation, and bounded hospitality while managing visitor expectations. By coordinating two-layered standards that reconcile regulatory compliance with cultural expression, facilitating experiential education partnerships, and advocating for enabling financial and environmental governance, DMOs can sustain place-based meaning and destination liveability. The findings also suggest that destination-level support should focus not only on promotion but also on authenticity-supportive upgrading, including context-sensitive standards, small-scale infrastructure support, and protection of local built and cultural fabric so that improvement does not become standardisation.

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5.3. Research limitations and directions for future research

The following considerations are best read as boundary conditions that shape the scope and transferability of the study. First, data were generated solely from owners'/managers' perspectives, so the findings primarily capture managerial rationales and practices of authenticity packaging rather than guests' lived experiences or the views of staff and host communities. This may mean that the findings reflect relatively coherent and self-legitimising managerial interpretations, while giving less visibility to possible tensions, mismatches, or contestations beyond the supply side. Second, because no comprehensive official register or reliable statistics were available for ecolodges in the study area, the sampling frame was constructed through local tourism networks and systematic online searches, followed by telephone verification; participation was contingent on reachability and willingness to participate, which defined the boundaries of the sample.

Third, the interviews were conducted by telephone, which enabled access to geographically dispersed ecolodge managers. However, telephone interviewing limits observation of non-verbal cues, spatial settings, material elements, and embodied hospitality practices central to how authenticity is enacted. It also reduced opportunities to examine discrepancies between reported and actual practices. Given the study's supply-side focus on authenticity construction, the use of owners and managers as key

informants was consistent with its purpose. The credibility of the thematic interpretation was strengthened by concrete operational examples from participants, the recurrence of similar patterns across interviews, and the stability of the thematic structure during the final interviews. Nevertheless, in the absence of systematic triangulation through direct observation, guest and staff perspectives, or online reviews, the findings should not be read as a fully verified account of how these practices are enacted, received, or contested.

Future research can extend this work in complementary directions. Multi-stakeholder studies that include guests, employees, local residents, and community partners, alongside relevant online reviews, would enable triangulation. Such work would help clarify where authenticity claims converge, where they diverge, and under what conditions constructive authenticity, soft staging, and slippage into staged display are recognised differently by various actors. Observation-based and ethnographic approaches could document more precisely how constructive authenticity, soft staging, and slippage into staged display are produced through everyday boundary work, guided participation, and frontstage–backstage organisation. Finally, comparative research across different Iranian regions and, where relevant, across ecologies and accommodation types could clarify which mechanisms are strongly context-bound and which travel beyond Bushehr and beyond ecolodges.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Ehsan Aslani**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Simin Yousefi**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Resources; **Seyedhossein Razavinasab**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Resources; **Zahed Ghaderi**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The profile of the respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	Capacity	Years of activity
R01	Female	35	20	9
R02	Male	43	40	9
R03	Male	38	40	14
R04	Male	40	35	7
R05	Male	53	28–32	7
R06	Male	44	25	5
R07	Male	41	25–28	8
R08	Male	40	12–16	9
R09	Male	44	20–30	8
R10	Male	43	30	7
R11	Male	45	35	9
R12	Male	52	20–25	9
R13	Female	56	8	8
R14	Female	42	8	6
R15	Female	42	20	6
R16	Male	38	44	6
R17	Male	33	50–60	5
R18	Male	55	30	7
R19	Male	61	80	8
R20	Male	43	30	6
R21	Male	40	30	3
R22	Male	40	40	6
R23	Male	42	10	7
R24	Male	40	20	7

Appendix 2

The interview began with brief background questions on respondent characteristics and lodge profile and then moved to open-ended prompts about visitors' motivations and expectations, managers' own definitions of an authentic Bushehri/coastal experience, and examples of memorable experiences they recommend. Further questions explored how specific elements of local culture and nature were selected, combined, or omitted in designing services; how commercial considerations and marketing shape what is emphasised; and whether/how local culture, history, and everyday life are narrated or performed for guests. Finally, the guide probed front-stage–backstage choices, perceptions of what feels more real versus more planned/staged, observed visitor reactions, the role of guest feedback in prompting changes, and efforts to balance marketable experiences with protecting local culture and the environment.