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Tourist or resident, or maybe both? International students' staycation considerations

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Abstract: The staycation has gained prominence amidst global crises, offering new perspectives on travel and place attachment. This study examines staycation experiences through the lens of international students, whose dual roles as residents and tourists provide unique insights into the interplay between home and away. The paper moves beyond Tuan's (1975) theory of place experience and the dichotomy of 'simple' (tourist-like) and 'complex' (resident-like) place perspective and examines how visiting familiar locales fosters transformative experiences. Through conducting in-depth interviews with international students in Malaysia, two key thematic areas and their subthemes have emerged: (1) comparisons between traditional tourism and staycation experiences (novelty, cultural distance, spatial distance, therapeutic value and convenience); and (2) the capacity of staycations to trigger transformative, experiential outcomes (personal reflection, learning, cultural enrichment, and socialization). These findings highlight the fluid continuum between the roles of residents and tourists, revealing how routine activities in staycations can evoke mindset shifts, mental restoration, and intercultural understanding. Moreover, the study challenges conventional notions of distance, highlighting its physical and cultural impact on transformative processes in staycations. From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for destination management, specifically for urban neighbourhoods in Malaysia to design integrated experiences catering to both 'staycation tourists' and residents.

Keywords: staycation, Malaysia, place experience, transformation, traditional tourism vs staycation, Sunway

1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the potential for populations to consider spending holidays locally is considerable. As international borders closed across many countries from 2020 to 2022 and health concerns took precedence, the lure of distant, exotic locations was curtailed, leading

many to explore the beauty and intrigue of their local surroundings (Fan et al., 2023; Romagosa, 2020). This shift was not merely a consequence of restricted mobility but mirrored a growing consciousness about the environmental footprint of long-haul travel (Ma et al., 2024). The pandemic unintentionally accelerated a trend concerning slower, more sustainable, and localized travel experiences (Balaban & Keller, 2024). Moreover, climate change prompts a rethink in international travel, where tourists are encouraged to reflect on their vacation practices and re-evaluate the impacts that wanderlust-based activities can have on the environment, including global warming (Fals, 2025).

Staycation refers to people's engagement in leisure activities, sightseeing, or relaxation within or close to their home or local community (Saidin et al., 2024). It can act as a type of citizenship behaviour that might strengthen local pride and awareness, such as the 'Discover Your Own Backyard' campaign in Melbourne (Australia), the 'All In' New York (US) staycation campaign which motivates locals to explore what the Big Apple has to offer (Falcon Villar, 2020), or the resident-focused marketing campaign in the Belgian Province of Limburg (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). The global staycation market in 2023 was estimated to be US$ 363.6 million, projected to increase to US$ 758.1 million by 2033 (Future Market Insights, 2023).

Tourism, conventionally understood as travelling to geographically distant places for leisure (Leiper, 1979), has seen transformative shifts in the contemporary discourses on leisure and mobilities (Hannam et al., 2014; Östh et al., 2023). The evolving conception of distance has repositioned not just how we understand space but also how we experience places and leisure. While prior conceptions of tourism valued the novelty of distant locations, the phenomena of proximity tourism (Romagosa, 2020; Salmela et al., 2021) and staycations (De Bloom et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2023) highlight the potential of nearby or familiar places in offering transformative experiences, akin to traditional tourist experiences. These concepts challenge traditional tourism paradigms, highlighting that transformative experiences can be derived from familiar environments, not just distant locales. This paradigmatic shift to valuing local or close-to-home experiences can be contextualized within the socio-geographical layers of distance, as described by Larsen and Guiver (2015), and the increasing tendency to value experiential dimensions over mere spatial distances (Tolkach et al., 2016). Staycations are also perceived as an "alternative to

stressful, pricey vacations" (Birchfield, 2008). Engagement in the staycation experience contributes to the construction of oneself and future experiences, especially visitors' interaction with visited places (and people) when they 'become' residents once again (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Staycation also refers to travel inwards, thus pointing to the nature of distance as an experience and indicating the significance of the "journey within" (Larsen & Guiver, 2013, p. 979), a dimension requiring scholarly attention. Specifically, in such urban neighbourhoods as Sunway City in Malaysia, an in-depth understanding of staycation tourism has tangible implications for community development, particularly given the presence of a large student population and both local and international employees residing in or near the area. While staycation tourism is well-established in Europe (Diaz-Soria & Coit, 2013), its manifestation in Asian contexts remains underexplored. The current study aims to contribute to this research gap, as the relationship between travel and distance has not had substantial attention in tourism literature.

The study identifies, contextualises, and examines tourism activities embedded in everyday life, asking whether residents experience places similar to conventional tourists. The proposed research deconstructs tourism mobilities, which are perceived to be more grounded, and reconceptualizes them not as defined by physical distance but deeply embedded in mundane routines and practices of everyday life. Informed by concepts of proximity tourism and the staycation as well as Tuan's (1975, 1990) theory of 'place experience', which explores how individuals relate to and perceive their environment, this study addresses the following three research questions: (1) *'How do individuals, particularly those in temporary resident roles (such as international students), experience staycations within urban settings?'*; (2) *'To what extent do staycation experiences in local or familiar environments resemble conventional tourism experiences?'*; (3) *'What are the transformative outcomes, if any, of engaging in staycation practices within everyday surroundings?'*

Consequently, this research problem navigates the complex terrains of the resident experience within the home or its proximity, aiming to discern how *staying* can parallel, if not exceed, the transformative power of *going*. This study extends the discussion of how residents and tourists perceive place by involving international students in Malaysia, who embody the dual role of both residents and tourists. Their unique perspective offers valuable insights into the layered meanings of place experience, particularly its transformative impact.

2. Literature review

2.1 Distance and proximity

Larsen and Guiver (2015) distinguish three 'layers' of distance: the first objectively measures spatial separation; the second considers relational aspects between objects across space, diminishing the physical separation; and the third acknowledges contextualized relationships across physical space, allowing people to interpret distance and proximity in various ways. This latter layer aligns with the concept of "social proximity" (Guedon, 2005, p.11), explaining how individuals experience closeness through their perceptions and representations of space, regardless of physical distance. Similarly, Boschma's (2004) notion of "abstract proximity" shows that proximity can be understood relationally rather than merely in terms of spatial metrics.

In a society characterized by hypermobility, the subjectivity of distance and proximity is a decisive factor in determining how physical distance is translated into actual experiences and place narratives (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). Distance is not necessarily equated with physical distance in terms of kilometres, but rather in relation to cultural novelty or familiarity of a destination (Salmela et al., 2021). Accordingly, individuals can perceive distance as a relative dimension, emphasizing experience over physical distance. Hence, Jeuring and Haartsen (2017) discuss people's understanding of distance in the context of holiday mobility, and Chen and Chen (2017) perceives tourism mobility as a mediator between places and people. Crucially, Besson (2017) argues that distance is not a prerequisite for the restorative aesthetic experience typically linked with holidays.

'Modern' urban living brings a wide range of rituals of touristic consumption (Richards, 2016). Tourist activity forms a nexus of social, environmental, and personal preferences and choices (den Hoed, 2020), where individual tourist experiences are important as they strongly influence everyday life, including people's identities and sociocultural integration. In the previous literature, considerable attention was given to community tourism landscapes, especially those with tangible social meaning capable of initiating transformation through the tourism experience (Terkendli, 2021). Familiar landscapes can produce similar feelings of escapism and novelty, representing a

contrast to those evoked by travel to more distant places (Salmela et al., 2021). Attempts to correlate travel with destination distance have been associated with the distance-decay model (McKercher & Lew, 2003). McKercher and Chow (2001) apply the concept of "cultural distance" in their study on tourism behaviour, specifically focusing on how the perceived difference between a tourist's culture and the destination's culture influences the tourist's experience.

2.2 Traditional tourism vs the staycation

The hypermobile world blurs the boundaries between tourism practices and mundane life (Salmela et al., 2021), thereby challenging the "binary distinctions between home/away, work/leisure, host/guest, domestic/international and everyday life and extraordinary holidays" (Cohen & Cohen, 2015, p. 11). However, the traditional perspective emphasises that the tourist experience is an escape from the obligations of work and everyday "thrift" (den Hoed, 2020), with opportunities to engage in exotic and exceptional experiences (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017; Vacher, 2014). Nonetheless, actual tourism mobilities are also "bound up with both every day and mundane journeys" (Hannam et al., 2014, p. 172), challenging the classical tourist-inhabitant dichotomy (Fabry et al., 2015). Daily mobility contains elements of tourism that are often overlooked in tourism literature (den Hoed, 2020), especially as people transfer practices from their holiday experiences to their daily lives (Salmela et al., 2021). According to Andriotis (2018), shorter-distance mobility and minimal consumption activities can reflect a novel lifestyle change. Thus, 'otherness' is not only situated in geographically distant environments but also in close-distance destinations (Diaz-Soria, 2017), confirming that exoticism is not necessarily linked to geographical distance or remoteness (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017).

Tourism expands to encompass the everyday lives of our cities and the emotionally distant parts of these living environments and their inhabitants (Hoogendoorn & Hammet, 2020). Mikkelsen and Cohen (2015, p. 20) argue that tourism studies should focus on "everyday contexts where tourism and the mundane intersect, and to the diversity of experience within them". Accordingly, local populations could discover or rediscover their hometowns from different points of view (Diaz-Soria, 2017), mainly as locals can easily adopt a touristic mindset by engaging in an expedition into their neighbourhoods (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017). According to Jeuring and Haartsen

(2017), travelling closer to home was built on rediscovering the self through tourism. Visiting familiar places from a new perspective enables people to reconstruct their own identities and those of the places they inhabit (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017).

Staycation tourism differs from other forms of domestic tourism, such as second-home tourism, and was initially viewed as a common tourism practice in the UK and USA (Coles & Hall, 2011; Molz, 2009). However, it has since gained global popularity as a tourism practice. It is thus more formally defined based on the voluntary decision to take a holiday at home or within the immediate vicinity (Molz, 2009). Staycation tourism is also called 'proximity tourism' (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). A 2017 special issue of *Tourism Geographies* focused on proximity and intraregional tourism, emphasizing the growing significance of proximity tourism in shaping people's identities (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Hollenhorst et al. (2014) introduce the term 'locavism,' which refers to slow travel and tourism close to home. Staycation tourism allows adaptation of the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011), where locals (tourists) curiously approach the visited places differently, looking for the unknown (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Jeuring (2018, p. 148) highlights the heterogeneity of residents' roles within staycations, especially as "residents can experience a city, region or country both as a tourist and as a resident". Such situations thus render the traditional dichotomies between locals and tourists less relevant.

Tourism has also shifted from the 'experience economy' to a 'transformative economy' (Neuhofer et al., 2020). A transformation of perspectives can occur when individuals critically reflect on their experiences and question their preconceived assumptions, beliefs, and values, becoming more open to alternative viewpoints (Mezirow, 1978). According to Coghlan and Weiler (2018), transformational change can be seen as an individualised process that leads to a new self-definition. Transformative tourism is one societal mechanism which can encourage a positive change in the attitudes and values of participants in the tourist experience (Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020). However, Dimitrovski et al. (2022) argue that there is a lack of empirical insight into the complexity of transformation processes in tourism. This raises the question of whether an individual's exploration of familiar surroundings can lead to transformative outcomes, as residents may rediscover their home environment in ways that foster personal growth and a renewed sense of self. Attention to this research problem could foster a broader inquiry into how staycation practices might

generate meaningful change within local, everyday contexts, thereby challenging the assumption that distance or novelty is necessary for transformation.

2.3 Tuan's theory of space in the context of tourists and residents

This study is grounded in Tuan's (1975, 1990) theory of place experience to understand the meaning of place for the local population and tourists. Tuan's (1975) work focuses on how individuals experience and relate to their surroundings, demonstrating that attachment to place grows over time through repeated experiences and sensory perceptions (e.g., sight, smell sound), thereby contributing to a sense of belonging and the establishment of emotional ties to the place. Building on this perspective, Diaz-Soria and Coit (2013) argue that local communities' perceptions of the surrounding landscape can offer new ways of renegotiating the meaning of place.

According to Tuan (1990), tourists' perspectives can be straightforward, as the novelty of the environment allows them to experience it with a sense of freedom and naivety. In contrast, the residents' perspective is more complex due to their deep immersion in the environment over extended periods. Thus, following Tuan's theory, when residents engage in staycation / proximity tourism, they experience their surroundings from both 'simple' (tourist-like) and 'complex' (resident-like) viewpoints. This dual perspective leads residents to express themselves, making them more critical of the aesthetic qualities of local places compared to their habitual daily routines (Diaz-Soria, 2017). Thus, visiting local sites, which involves mundane practices such as taking pictures, shopping, recreating, enjoying culinary experiences, and appreciating the art and culture, can be a way to engage with the simple and complex dimensions of place experience.

2.4. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework guided by Tuan's (1990) theory of place. On the left column, 'staycation' is indicated as the subject-matter, predicated by 'international students' as the participants. The middle column reflects Research Question 1, namely the assessment of international students' staycation experiences by considering their unique position as both residents and tourists. The central concern is whether international students adopt a simple or complex approach towards staycation experiences. The study postulates that a reasonable period of stay in the host country could lead to familiarity with the place and culture, which may alter the international

student's tourist gaze. Tuan's (1990) theory of place is ideal to ascertain participants' experiences, qualitatively gauged on a spectrum from simple (tourists) to complex (residents). This is depicted by the horizontal two-directional arrow above the sphere of 'experiences', where one end signifies the simple approach whilst the opposite represents the complex approach. The middle column also highlights Research Question 2, which concerns the evaluation of participants' staycation experiences amidst the blurring of the boundary between everyday life and tourism. The assumption is that a good staycation evokes a range of positive experiences that one could expect from conventional tourism. Hence, staycation experiences in Sunway City are compared to conventional tourism experiences. The column on the right reflects Research Question 3, whereby participants' staycation experiences are further analysed to identify transformative outcomes (if any). On the premise that tourism is potentially transformative, the study is open to the probability of transformational change that impacts attitudes, values, and self-definition (Pung & Del Chiappa, 2020; Weiler, 2018). Collectively, such transformative outcomes are described as drivers of self-identification.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
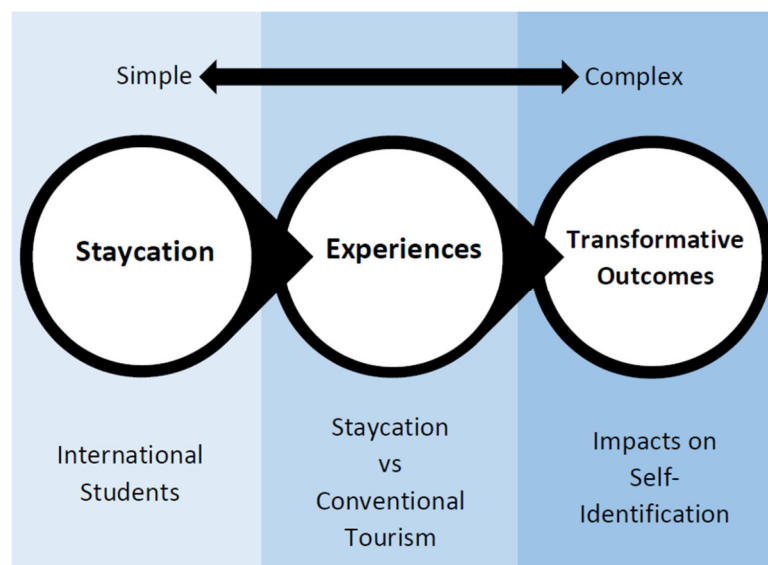
Source: Authors own creation

## 3. Methodology

3.1 Research setting

This study took place within Sunway City, an 800-acre privately developed township in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, situated within the Klang Valley region on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, near the national capital, Kuala Lumpur (www.sunwayproperty.com). Sunway City is centrally located in this rapidly urbanising corridor. The township has evolved into an important educational and leisure hub, anchored by several higher education institutions and characterised by a substantial international student population (see Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Location of Bandar Sunway (Sunway City) in the state of Selangor, close to the capital city Kuala Lumpur (Base map: © OpenStreetMap contributors. Licensed under ODbL 1.0. www.openstreetmap.org)
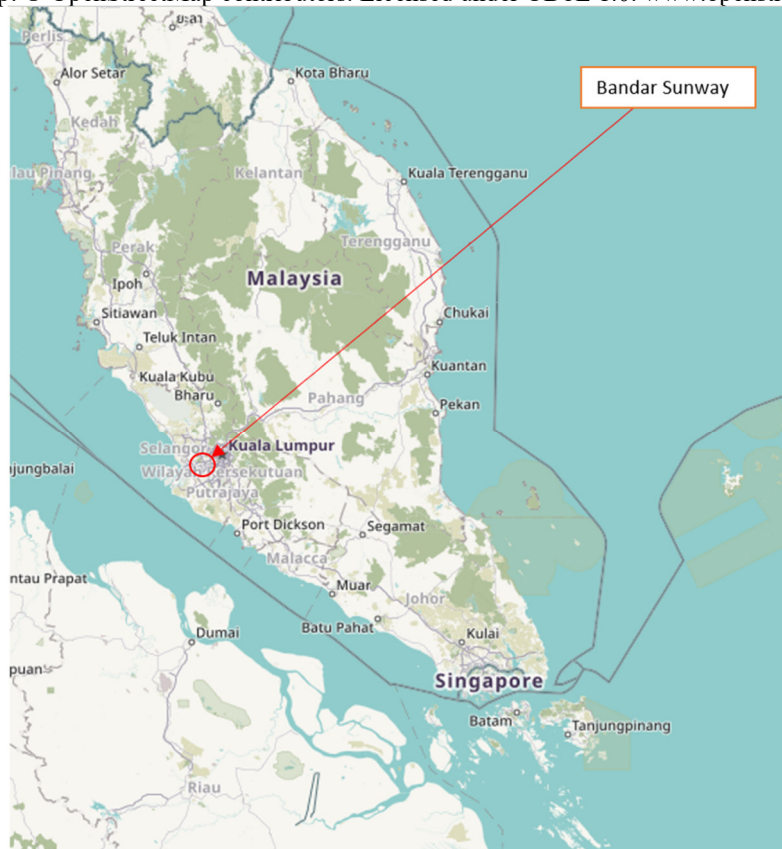
Source: Authors own creation

Figure 3. Map of Sunway City, Selangor, Malaysia. The map shows the close integration of higher education institutions (blue-framed) and commercial and recreational sites (red-framed). These spatial proximities shape the hybrid place experiences of international students as they navigate everyday life within this urban enclave (Base map: © OpenStreetMap contributors. Licensed under ODbL 1.0. www.openstreetmap.org)
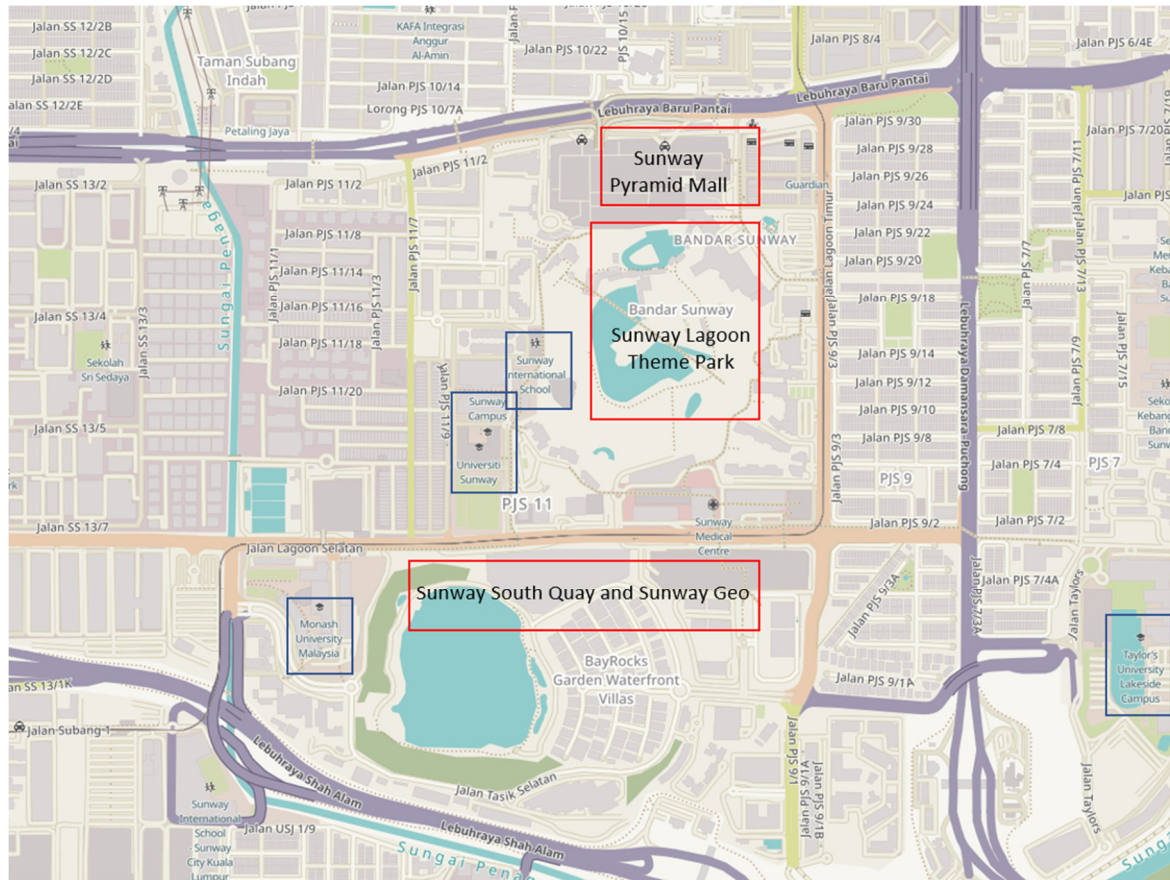
Source: Authors own creation

Sunway has been recognised by the Institute of Planners as a Low Carbon City and an integrated green township by the Green Building Index 2012 (Malaysian Business, 2017). It is a prominent mixed-use urban development featuring residential, commercial, educational, health and recreational facilities, including the well-known Sunway Pyramid Mall, Sunway Lagoon theme park, and Sunway University. The area is often highlighted as a model for integrated urban neighbourhoods with smart city elements (Kaur, 2019). The presence of a large international student community and the proximity between educational institutions and commercial-leisure spaces make Sunway City an ideal setting for examining hybrid place experiences and the everyday mobilities of globally mobile youth.

3.2 Data collection

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews to capture rich, nuanced personal narratives of staycation experiences. The aim was to develop an explanatory

framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Momeni et al., 2018). To this end, the qualitative approach is more suited to a comprehensive exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs, which the research questions require. Through a diverse range of open-ended data, we were able to immerse in "meaning-making" by analysing the participants' experiences that reveal transformative fluidity (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314), as the next section illustrates.

Twelve face-to-face, open-ended interviews were conducted with international students residing in Sunway City, Malaysia. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with key inclusion criteria being that they were international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions, residing in or near Sunway City, and having lived in Malaysia for a minimum of six months. This threshold ensured participants' dual role as both residents and temporary tourists, offering a unique perspective on staycation experiences. Table 1 provides detailed background information on the twelve international student participants involved in the study. Beyond gender and country of origin, the table includes data on participants' age, educational and financial backgrounds, current level of study in Malaysia, duration of residence in the country, and prior travel experience. This expanded profile offers a more comprehensive understanding of participants' personal and academic contexts, which influence their engagement with staycation tourism in Sunway City. While person triangulation, understood as the designation of participant levels (e.g., individual, family, group) (Kimchi et al., 1991), was not feasible in this study, we enhanced rigour and trustworthiness by selecting participants from diverse backgrounds. Their shared experiences are reflected in common thematic codes, while their differences offer rich contrasts that deepen our analysis, particularly in relation to Research Question 3, which explores the transformative outcomes of staycations.

Interviews were conducted by trained international PhD students under the guidance of their academic supervisors and held in English, lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. The interviews took place in quiet, neutral locations to ensure a conducive environment for reflection and to seek thoughtful responses. The sample comprised a roughly equal gender distribution to capture diverse perspectives, with seven male and five female respondents. The sample was drawn from

international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, with participants originating from Djibouti, Ghana, India, Iran, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sudan.

Table 1. Data of participants involved in the study

Number	Gender	Country of origin	Age	Education Background	Financial background	Study in Malaysia	Time residing in Malaysia	Travel experience
1	Male	Ghana	48	Master degree	Middle income	PhD	1 year	Local travel
2	Male	Pakistan	35	Master degree	Low income	PhD	1 year	Local and some international experience in Asia
3	Male	Djibouti	26	Master degree	Middle income	PhD	7 years	Local travel
4	Male	India	30s	Master degree	Low income	PhD	7 months	Local travel
5	Male	Myanmar	27	Master degree	Middle Income	PhD	1 year	Local and one trip to Singapore
6	Male	Nepal	38	Master degree	High Income	PhD	1 year and 6 months	Local and some international experience in Asia
7	Female	Iran	22	High School	Low income	Bachelor	3 years and 6 months	Rarely and local travel only
8	Male	Iran	41	Master degree	Middle income	PhD	1 year	Frequent local travel
9	Female	Iran	31	Master degree	Middle income	PhD	4 years	Local and some international experience in Asia
10	Female	Sudan	30s	Bachelor degree	Middle income	Master	4 years	Frequent local and international travel
11	Female	Pakistan	30s	Master degree	Middle income	PhD	7 months	Frequent local and one international
12	Female	Pakistan	20s	Bachelor	Middle income	Master		Local travel

The interview questions were designed to stimulate discussion around the three main themes of the research: (1) traditional tourism practices; (2) the concept of staycation; (3) the capacity of staycation experiences to prompt transformative outcomes. In addition, respondents were asked to provide basic socio-demographic information. The research team, which includes scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds in strategic management, marketing, tourism studies, sociology, and geography, reviewed the interview questions to ensure they were appropriately framed. Based on this interdisciplinary feedback, an interview protocol was developed to guide the interviews and ensure a coherent flow of topics.

Before conducting the interviews, ethical considerations were carefully addressed. The study received institutional ethical approval, and participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and anonymous. Participants' confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection process, taking into consideration the diverse backgrounds of the participants. The importance of cultural sensitivity was adhered to during the interview session, where consent was obtained to ensure that social customs were maintained. Participants were notified about data protection. The diverse participants displayed in Table 1 were informed that the presentation of the data would be appropriately disseminated to prepare for the analysis and upheld based on the ethical standards stipulated in the University's ethics procedure. All participants provided informed consent, and to recognize their time and contribution, each received a small voucher for use on the Grab (taxi and food delivery service) application. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Initial recruitment targeted international students directly, with subsequent participants recommended by those already interviewed. This approach ensured a diverse yet contextually relevant sample of respondents for the study.

3.3 Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim shortly after the interviews were conducted to ensure accuracy. The analysis of the transcribed data was facilitated by MAXQDA software (version 22), which was employed to categorize and organize the data systematically. This approach enabled the identification of key themes and sub-themes related to the staycation experience. MAXQDA enhanced the flexibility and rigor of the analysis process, mitigating the limitations often encountered with manual qualitative data analysis (Crowley et al., 2002). Before the coding process began, the research team carefully read through the entire dataset to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives. This initial immersion into the data ensured that subsequent coding and theme development would be grounded in a nuanced interpretation of the respondents' experiences. MAXQDA's capabilities also allowed for iterative refinement of the thematic structure, ensuring that the analysis was systematic and reflective of the complex, multifaceted nature of staycation practices. The first stage considered data coding by following recommendations by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Saldaña (2015). Open coding was applied to discover the themes and patterns to avoid making the data fit pre-conceived categories. Corbin and Strauss (1990) define open coding as "an interpretive process by which data are broken down

analytically" (p. 12). All codes were examined during this stage to identify broader meanings and patterns before being transformed into categories. Saldaña (2015) advocates two coding cycles, the first one concerns initial coding and the second involves classifying, prioritising, integrating, synthesising, abstracting, and conceptualising.

During the second cycle, pattern coding was applied (Saldaña, 2015, p. 236). Line-by-line coding was used within the open coding process by re-reading the interview information to understand how participants perceived the staycation. Axial coding of the data followed open coding, trying to find an answer to questions concerning: "when," "where," "why," "who," "how," and "with what consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this way, a large set of information was grouped and interrelated within a smaller set of themes or categories that characterized the process under study (Creswell, 2007). Finally, selective coding was deployed to integrate the categories into the conceptual framework (see Figure 1 above) to reveal the complexities of the staycation phenomenon.

We acknowledge that our positionality has shaped the design, data collection, and interpretation of this study (Saunders et al., 2024). The research team comprised members with varying degrees of familiarity with Sunway City, offering multiple perspectives on the study site. The first author's expertise in studying tourist identities and travel motivations, combined with prior field visits to Sunway City, initiated the research collaboration. The third and fifth authors are long-term residents of Sunway City, whose insider perspectives reflect both everyday lived experience and critical reflections on local urban transformations. The second and fourth authors, having worked previously as expatriate academics in the area, contributed outsider views grounded in professional familiarity. This combination of perspectives allowed for robust researcher triangulation and reflexivity throughout the study. All authors have at different points in their academic journeys, lived abroad and engaged in forms of staycation, which enabled a degree of empathetic understanding while also prompting systematic reflection on personal biases during data interpretation.

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings were organized into three main themes: (1) international students' staycation experiences, (2) comparisons between traditional tourism and staycation experiences, and (3) capacity of

staycations to trigger transformative, experiential outcomes. Within each identified theme, sub-themes were acknowledged, incorporating empirical evidence based on verbatim illustrations and descriptions.

4.1 International students' staycation experience

With familiarity gained from an extended stay, participants' perspectives reveal a blend of simple and complex views, highlighting the dual identities they navigate as both tourists and residents (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). The complexity of their experiences is tied to how long they have lived in Sunway, influencing how they perceive staycation activities. For example, Respondent 3, who had lived in Malaysia for seven years and acquired basic proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia, viewed himself as integrated into the Sunway community. His approach to staycation tourism was pragmatic, with minimal reflection on Sunway as a tourist destination. Similarly, Respondent 9 described how, after four years, Sunway had become more of a home than a place to explore as a tourist:

> …maybe within the first few years I was here… it was new and I feel more like a tourist in Sunway. But now, after four years living here, so I think if I go somewhere in Sunway, now it does not really feel like a tourist experience for me (…). But Sunway is now like home.

As participants' familiarity with Sunway City deepened, respondents' staycation activities shifted from traditional tourist attractions to activities more aligned with the daily life of residents. Respondent 11 transitioned to spending time at archery ranges, bowling alleys, video arcades, and walking around Sunway's lake. This gradual transition underscores how repeated visits diminish the novelty of attractions, causing international students to increasingly engage in everyday leisure activities typically associated with residents. Moreover, the longer students resided in Sunway City, the more nuanced their staycation expectations became. Respondent 1, a male student from Ghana, enjoyed the accessibility and affordability of local attractions but expressed a critical view, noting the limited availability of African cuisine. Therefore, to satisfy this cultural craving, he would travel to Chow Kit in central Kuala Lumpur, where he could connect with the African community:

> (…) I go to Chow Kit, which is a market area, I get many African people. (…) when I go there, I feel like I am in Ghana.

The duality of identity between resident and tourist is also evident in how Respondent 1 balances critical observations, such as the absence of African cuisine, with localized knowledge of Sunway's culinary landscape. As Cohen and Cohen (2015) suggest, such fluidity blurs the boundaries between tourist and resident, rendering a strict binary distinction between the two roles inadequate. Informatively, the capacity to be critical of the staycation experience thus concurs with both Diaz-Soria's (2017) view concerning residents being critically aware of their environment and Mezirow's (1978) position, where individuals critically reflect on their experience as a marker of transformation.

Respondent 7, who had visited Sunway City's attractions "multiple times," demonstrated a complex understanding of her surroundings, allowing her to explore the locale confidently. She remarked: "I feel that I am a tourist when I go to a new place, but in other places I feel like a local." The above insights resonate with Tuan's (1990) theory of place, where participants' experiences oscillate between simple and complex approaches to staycations. The participants navigated their dual identities as tourists and residents, where a sense of familiarity allowed them to experience Sunway City much like locals. At the same time, moments of critical reflection often reminded them of their foreignness. The data reveal a unique phenomenon whereby international students shift from focusing on tourist "must-see" activities to more resident-oriented staycation practices, thus gradually ceasing to perceive their activities as touristic. This suggests that the most profound form of immersion occurs when they stop consciously framing their experiences as staycations.

4.2 Staycation experience versus the conventional tourism experience
Drawing on Tuan's (1990) theory of place, highlighting how individuals' understanding of space evolves through lived experiences, international students' negotiation of place meanings is duly examined. From this perspective, staycation experiences reveal a deeper familiarity with the destination than conventional tourism, especially as participants combine a tourist's perspective (a more superficial or simple engagement to place) with a resident's perspective (a more familiar or 'complex' approach to place). This scenario is further discussed in the following five sub-themes: (1) novelty; (2) cultural distance; (3) spatial distance; (4) therapeutic value; and (5) convenience (time, cost, and safety).

4.2.1 Novelty

The interviewed students considered conventional tourism to have the capacity to provide more novelty than staycation experiences. Respondent 9 explained that a staycation lacks a "sense of newness because in proximity tourism, wherever you go, you will come back home at the end of the day (...)". In contrast, conventional tourism secures the "experience of life" such that "distance does not matter" (Respondent 2). One is challenged to go "outside [one's] own comfort zone" in conventional tourism (Respondent 3). Interestingly, the comfort zone is an important advantage of the staycation experience compared to conventional tourism (see 4.2.2 below). However, the findings do not negate the presence of novelty in staycations. A destination that consistently reinvents itself and provides diverse touristic values is more likely to provide novel experiences, as expressed by respondent 11:

> There are concerts in Lagoon View all the time. So, I have background music going on all the time. Plus, every time I go to [Sunway] Pyramid, there is something new going on (…) for example, on Christmas, there was this whole decoration (…) the places where you could take pictures, there were whole sets [of backdrops for photography]. There are always sales there, so that's perfect.

A person's attitude and outlook influence the perception of novelty. In Respondent 1's view, a shift in mindset is necessary to appreciate what the staycation offers – one could derive fun from seemingly ordinary activities. Respondent 3 expressed a similar view, stating that:

> You can be a tourist within your country. Even in your own hometown, right? (…) it's the mindset and your perspectives shifting from resident to tourist.

In this vein, Respondent 8 explained that although he had visited most of the attractions in Sunway City, "they do not get repetitive, boring". Respondent 9 implied that keeping an open mind can be a transformative opportunity, expressing:

> Maybe they can get their minds to be a little free, like a child. To just explore and enjoy every opportunity as a tourist, it would be good.

Consequently, the staycation serves an important function in stimulating curiosity or desire for conventional tourism. In other words, a novel experience or discovery during a staycation may lead a person to plan future travel. Respondent 10, a Sudanese national, described her discovery of Korean traditional food and culture at a Korean exhibition booth in Sunway Pyramid:

> I decided on that day I will go to that country and visit to try those type of things there. So now it's one of my goals (Respondent 10).

4.2.2 *Cultural distance*

Using McKercher and Chow's (2001) concept of 'cultural distance', we sought to evaluate the extent to which one's cultural (un)familiarity with a destination influences their travel decision. Essentially, cultural distance could be considered both as a driver and barrier to travel. The cultural novelty of a destination pulls some tourists, while others are deterred by unfamiliarity with the destination's culture. At this juncture, it is important to examine whether participants consider cultural distance as a driver or barrier to travel, and how cultural distance influences participants' staycation experiences.

All participants expressed keenness to participate in conventional tourism, especially when opportunities arise and finances permit, even if communication barriers exist during tourist encounters (Respondent 2 and 10). Cultural distance was not seen as a deterrent. As Respondent 3 noted, the purpose of international travel is to "experience a new culture, new people, new language". Conventional tourism provides opportunities to "learn more about different cultures and (…) experience new things which might not be available [in] proximity tourism" (Respondent 9). In comparison, many participants perceive Sunway City as their 'staycation comfort zone' (Respondents 3, 5, 8, 11, and 12). The area's English-speaking environment (Respondent 2) and friendly people who embrace cultural diversity (Respondent 1) constitute a comfortable environment. In addition, food habits and familiarity with local cuisine also play an essential role in influencing a preference towards the staycation experience (Respondent 4).

The notion of the 'comfort zone' did not occur overnight. Participants initially experienced Sunway City in a similar way to how a tourist would visit the locale (simple approach), until familiarity led them to adopt the vantage point of residents (complex approach). Respondent 3's journey illustrates this point:

> When I first came, yes, because of the language barrier, I did face challenges. But now I'm very comfortable and I've learned the language and I know the country.

An international student who is relatively new to Sunway City may not perceive their staycation as a comfort zone. This is evident from Respondent 11's account:

> Since I'm still relatively new to Malaysia, enjoying the food is one of the highlights of the day because there's always something new.

Sunway City is a tertiary education hub with a significant international student population. Therefore, participants' staycation experiences arguably expose them to cultural diversity and enhance their cultural competence. This is reflected in Respondent 9's narrative of her experience:

> (…) when I compare the current version of myself to the version that I was a few years back, especially when I was in Iran, I can say that now I am like more flexible towards new cultures, new things (…) if you are not flexible enough, sometimes you even cannot try a new food. But nowadays, I can see this change in myself.

From this perspective, staycation experiences improve an international student's cultural savviness and reduces the barrier of cultural distance. This is a notable finding and resembles specific forms of distance-determined (conventional) tourism which foster cultural confidence and intercultural dialogue (Carbone 2017; Lin et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Spatial distance

The findings further indicate that geographical distance influences the frequency of international students' staycation. This reflects Andriotis's (2018) study, showing that mobility at shorter distances could impact lifestyle. The fact that Sunway City's attractions are within walking distance encourages frequent visits, as indicated by some respondents. Nonetheless, one's perception of spatial distance might also be influenced by "travel laziness", as observed in Respondent 4's comment: "I feel lazy, you know, or you when that distance is more. So, I feel like demotivated, I will do it another time".

Staycations within Sunway City enable spontaneity in that prior planning is invariably unnecessary before taking up an activity. Respondent 4 described a spontaneous walk around the South Quay Lake and participating in fish feeding as activities that one could do in order to "remove boredom". At the same time, Respondent 6 spoke of "immediately engaging in our regular activities" whenever one desires. Hence, most participants came to associate Sunway City as an anxiety-free staycation. As Respondent 7 indicated:

> (…) proximity tourism is more chill. You can just plan it a day before, or even on the same day. You can just go there alone or with your friends. And I think it does not have anxiety [to] it. Just go and enjoy your time and go back home.

In contrast, however, conventional tourism requires planning. The very preparatory acts of planning for conventional tourism may enhance one's experience. According to Respondent 3:

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The experience starts from booking the flight and going to the other place. But when you are staying in the same country, you don't have the excitement because you're not booking a flight, (…) you're not packing your clothes, you're not unpacking.

Insightfully, some respondents argue that spatial distance should not be a barrier for a once in a lifetime experience. This sentiment is echoed by Respondent 8, who placed the value of the destination ahead of the barrier of distance. Furthermore, Respondent 2 emphasised:

It is human nature that we want to explore the place at least once in our life. Ok, so in that case, distance does not matter.

4.2.4 Therapeutic value

The findings indicate that most participants derived therapeutic value from their Sunway City staycations. The feeling of having oneself "refreshed" (Respondents 2, 6, 9, 11, and 12) and "relaxed" (Respondent 8), with an improved state of mind (Respondents 4), was integral to their staycation experiences. Respondent 12's statement sums up the importance of an affordable getaway within the proximity of their own residence:

Nevertheless, many respondents consider the therapeutic value of conventional tourism to be more enduring. Respondent 12 explained that travel to a farther destination offered more lasting therapeutic value but acknowledged the cost and effort involved. Similarly, Respondent 4 expressed that conventional travel remains in one's mind as a "long-term memory" – like his first trip from Ethiopia to Malaysia. Why is this so? Arguably, the anticipation of a longer journey requires more preparation and the novelty of venturing out of one's comfort zone provides a more enduring therapeutic experience. Also, the chance to "stay away from the whole thing, from all your routines for a couple of days" (Respondent 9) enhances the therapeutic value of conventional travel.

4.2.5 Convenience

The staycation is less time-consuming than conventional tourism (Respondents 2, 4, 8, 10, 11 and 12). It is ideal:

if you don't have much time (…) And same for workplaces, you work five, six, seven days a week, you cannot afford to go too far away (Respondent 11).

All participants intended to embark on conventional tourism when their finances permit. Hence, a staycation is perceived as a cost-effective alternative at this juncture of their student journey.

Moreover, the convenience of participating in a staycation compared to conventional tourism motivated the participants' touristic choices. As Respondent 2 put it:

> For the traditional tourism, I have to make a proper plan. (…) proximity tourism, we can arrange any time as per our convenience, availability of friends and everything.

Staycation neither requires research on the destination, accommodation and tickets (Respondents 7 and 10), nor a travel visa (Respondent 9). Furthermore, in times of numerous crises worldwide, safety risks associated with international travel render the staycation as an attractive alternative, especially for the aged and persons with poor health or disabilities. In comparison, a staycation is "probably safer" because "[y]ou know the place, you know the environment, you know the people and you know how to [get] help" (Respondent 11). Gender influences one's perception of travel safety. Based on the experiences of female travellers, particularly those engaging in solo international travel (Rostami et al., 2024), safety and health concerns tend to be more pronounced for female international students. Even Respondent 4, a male participant, acknowledged that safety is a concern "if you are alone abroad."

4.3 Staycation transformative outcomes

With easy access and frequent visits to Sunway City's attractions, the transformative outcomes for the participants were subtle and "all year round" (Respondent 11), improving one's confidence over time (Respondent 7). This aligns with the extant literature, which states that transformation is a process rather than a fixed state (Wade, 1998). Hence, the sub-themes of personal reflection, learning, cultural enrichment, and socialization should be viewed in this light. For some participants, their therapeutic experiences were closely linked to their transformative experiences, in that mental calm from their staycation contributed to personal insights and changes (Respondents 4 and 12). While our focus here is primarily on transformative outcomes, the connection between healing and transformative experiences (Helskog, 2014) is evident from some of the responses highlighted below.

4.3.1 Personal reflection

Many respondents' staycation afforded them time and space for personal reflection. Consequently, a change in mindset or the adoption of new perspectives is recurrent in the data (Respondents 1,

3, 4, 6, 9, 11, and 12). The South Quay Lake, particularly, was conducive to personal reflection (Respondent 10). Personal reflections that lead to new perspectives are precursors to transformation. This is consistent with Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory, whereby changing personal beliefs due to exposure to one's environment is one of the main phases of transformation. For Respondent 9, the transformation includes the feeling of gratitude through everyday living:

> I think if people can learn to enjoy the moment, that will help, and also if they learn to enjoy the little things in life (…) because we always have all these very defined and very like top goals in our lives to achieve, sometimes I think it really prevents us from enjoying small things in our lives… like, for example, have [a] day and just treat yourself as a tourist (…) (Respondent 9).

Nonetheless, the transformative outcomes of conventional tourism are deeper, according to Respondents 4, 6, and 8. Whilst staycation experiences promote rejuvenation and mental wellness, the transformative outcomes are not "life-changing". For Respondent 8, travel to farther destinations can provide more positive experiences. Just as the therapeutic value of a staycation was deemed transient, the transformative impact of the staycation was considered "short term" (Respondent 4).

4.3.2 Learning and cultural enrichment

From the lens of Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory, tourism experiences are vital stimulants that facilitate personal growth. Both staycation and conventional tourism provide opportunities to learn new experiences and cultures. However, some respondents stated that conventional tourism would likely afford more profound learning (Respondents 3, 7, and 9). In the words of Respondent 7:

> (…) distant or international tourism maybe is more effective in changing people's view towards the world around them or people around them. For example, if you spend a week in a foreign country, it gives you more time to be familiar with their culture, with people and their lifestyles, and I think it is more effective than proximity tourism.

Interestingly, the learning journey of a staycation seems to be bounded by an individual's curation of activities. This is evident from Respondent 7's narrative of independence, where familiarity with the staycation locale allowed her to deviate from a group plan to acquire new experiences. Assured of her abilities to navigate the city, Respondent 7 told her friends: "I am not going back

with you, I am here for the New Year and I am not coming back!" She stayed on for the countdown with the New Year revellers. By contrast, the learning experience from conventional tourism may be mediated by the availability or competence of a tour guide. Accordingly, Respondent 3 shared his conventional sightseeing experience, where it was not possible to derive valuable learning: "I don't know what's the history behind. I'm just looking at it…I'm not getting that same experience".

4.3.3 Socialization

Both the staycation and conventional tourism provide platforms for socialization, but participants had differing views on the depth and nature of interaction each allows. Overall, staycations are perceived as more conducive to socialization due to the frequency of repeat encounters and a lack of haste. The transformative socialization power of staycations is illustrated by Respondent 7's account of her evolving personality:

> I have like a large group of friends now… from different nationalities, that I explore different places with different friends. So, it has transformed me to be [a] more extroverted person.

Staycations thus promote social bonds through repeated encounters. As Respondent 10 explained:

> You have time to go to one place around four times, so you have a better chance of knowing people, better socialising and, also, enjoying the place.

The long-term transformative effect of the staycation experience includes lifelong friendships and solid social relationships. Respondent 12, for instance, developed strong friendships with fellow visitors at the South Quay Lake, where she frequently sought tranquillity.

Nevertheless, Respondent 9 considered the transformative capacity of conventional tourism to be higher because it encourages novel encounters with people of different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the repetitiveness of staycation activities has its downside – once the staycation experience loses its appeal, its transformative power is lost. This point was highlighted by Respondent 7:

> I think transformative experiences in local tourism are more repetitive and same (…) If you are a student like me, you have time to do it multiple times, and after a while it would be normal to you.

That said, Respondent 10 pointed out that the 'rushed' nature of conventional tourism means the possibility of interacting meaningfully with people is limited, not to mention that "you don't have much time to socialise with people."

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

To address Research Question 1: *'How do individuals, particularly those in temporary resident roles (such as international students), experience staycations within urban settings?* – the findings indicate a fluidity in international students' approach towards the staycation, whereby they navigate between a simple tourist's approach and a complex resident's approach in deciphering their experiences. This reflects Tuan's (1990) theory of place, whereby the 'simple' and 'complex' may intersect in a fluid, indistinct space. The study illustrates that international students engage more deeply and meaningfully with the staycation when they adopt a complex approach. Paradoxically, however, this occurs when they no longer consciously identify their activities as a staycation. In other words, the most immersive staycation experiences emerge when the boundaries between leisure and everyday life blur to the point of becoming indistinguishable (see Figure 4).

To respond to Research Question 2: *To what extent do staycation experiences in local or familiar environments resemble conventional tourism experiences?* - firstly, the staycation can provide novelty, albeit to a lesser degree than conventional tourism. To provide novelty, a staycation destination must regularly reinvent itself and provide diverse touristic value. Furthermore, visitors' perception of novelty varies depending on one's attitude and expectations. Secondly, the staycation is characterised by the advantage of minimal cultural distance, which enhances the travel comfort zone for international students, especially when they adopt a complex, resident-like approach to engaging with the destination. Thirdly, the staycation benefits from optimal spatial distance that encourages spontaneity. However, on the other side, greater spatial distance travelled within conventional tourism and the preparatory acts of planning can enhance travel satisfaction. Fourthly, both the staycation and conventional tourism provide therapeutic value, but the latter is deemed to have a more lasting effect. Lastly, time, cost, convenience, and safety weigh in favour of the staycation (see Figure 4).

Turning to Research Question 3: *What are the transformative outcomes, if any, of engaging in staycation practices within everyday surroundings?* Our analysis shows that staycation experiences can result in both short-term and long-term transformative effects. Many participants initially described the outcomes as therapeutic and transient, often referring to feelings of refreshment, relaxation, or temporary relief from stress. However, these seemingly short-term effects often served as catalysts for more enduring changes. For instance, repeated engagement in local exploration and proximity tourism facilitated socialization, self-reflection, and a gradual shift in personal dispositions, such as moving from introversion to extroversion. These changes, while not always immediately recognised by participants as 'life-changing', indicate a deeper, cumulative transformation that unfolds over time. The re-evaluation of life priorities, reconsideration of work–life balance, and increased appreciation for one's immediate surroundings are further examples of long-term outcomes that stem from what began as short-term experiences. Moreover, participants frequently contrasted the intensity of conventional tourism experiences with the more subtle, recurring impact of staycations. While traditional travel may offer more intense or novel experiences, these are often externally driven and temporally bounded. In contrast, staycations, though initially perceived as peripheral or routine, can promote more sustained internal engagement. Over time, the regularity and accessibility of staycation experiences may foster transformations that are more profound than those derived from conventional tourism. In this sense, the depth of transformation appears to depend less on the external setting and more on the internal processes of reflection and meaning-making (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Conceptualisation of staycation perspectives
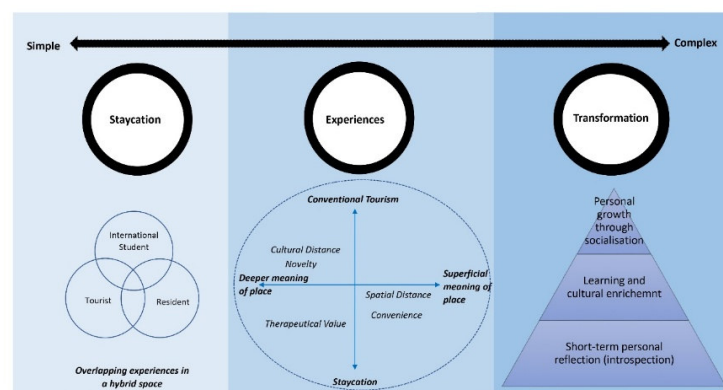
Source: Authors own creation

5.2 Theoretical implications

The study contributes to existing theory in a three-fold manner. *Firstly*, the study provided empirical insight into the tourist-resident dichotomy, an issue that has not been adequately addressed in the previous literature. The study findings of international students provided evidence of heterogeneity of roles involved in the staycation experience (Jeuring, 2018), acknowledging the continuum and overlapping between residents' and tourists' (and international student) practices rather than their clear distinction or dichotomy. The study concludes that the international students' gaze incorporates both elements of the tourist (Urry & Larsen, 2011) and resident gaze (Diaz-Soria, 2017), especially in the quest to revisit the familiar in search of the unknown. This challenges the rigid division between tourist and resident roles (Fabry et al., 2015). Moreover, the findings confirmed Andriotis' (2018) notion of staycation as a novel lifestyle change characterized by short-distance travel and minimal consumption, as based on the interview insights relating to time, distance, and the financial aspects of staycation experiences. Finally, the staycation experience initiates the renegotiation of individual mindsets (through adoption of new perspectives) and alteration of community identities (by forming community tourism landscapes), as previously discussed by Jeuring and Haartsen (2017).

Secondly, the study frequently referred to the concept of distance, arguing that reducing physical distance can result in more convenient, time-efficient, and cost-effective vacations. Moreover, the concept of cultural distance (McKercher & Chow So-Ming, 2001) was highlighted in the context of staycations among international students, reinforcing Jeuring and Haartsen's (2017) emphasis on prioritizing transformative experiences over physical distance. The findings also contribute to the limited knowledge concerning the relationship between travel and distance, offering insights that expand upon the distance-decay model proposed by McKercher and Lew (2003). The traditional perception that tourism experiences are inherently linked to distant destinations was questioned, especially on the basis that distance did not determine the quality of the experience. What mattered most were the transformative outcomes, as evidenced in the interviews. This study aligns with Dimitrovski et al.'s (2022) call for more empirical research into the complexity of transformation processes in tourism.

Thirdly, this study contributes to the advancement of Tuan's (1975, 1990) theory of place experience by extending beyond its foundational binary of 'simple' (tourist-like) and 'complex' (resident-like) perspectives. While Tuan's framework distinguishes between these two modes of engaging with place, our findings complicate this dichotomy by pointing to a notion of a hybrid place experience, as exemplified by international students who simultaneously occupy roles of both residents and tourists. This hybridity is not merely a transitional state but a sustained experiential mode, in which individuals move fluidly between gazes and practices. Our research shows that blended identities, such as those of international students living long-term in a foreign urban context, produce dynamic and overlapping forms of place engagement. For instance, routine and commercial spaces like malls, urban lakes, or food courts were found to evoke deep personal reflection, emotional resonance, and intercultural understanding. These are qualities Tuan typically associates with complex, resident-based experiences rooted in long-term attachment. Our study thus challenges the assumption that transformative or profound place experiences are confined to emotionally significant or symbolically rich environments.

In doing so, we push Tuan's theory forward by demonstrating that topophilic experiences can emerge from everyday, commodified, or even mundane spatial encounters, especially when experienced through the lens of hybrid subjectivity. We propose that future research consider not only the duality between tourist and resident perspectives but also the ambiguities of roles and belonging, as well as the interstitial identities of individuals who move between cultures, places, and modes of being that characterize global mobility today. In this sense, we introduce a third experiential modality, the hybrid mode, which has not been explicitly theorized in Tuan's framework but is increasingly relevant in contemporary urban and mobile contexts.

5.3 Practical implications

From a practical perspective, this study offers insights into how urban destinations can cater to the dual roles of residents and tourists. For urban neighbourhoods in Malaysia and beyond, understanding the nuanced interplay between 'simple' and 'complex' place experiences enables destination managers to craft innovative and meaningful staycation opportunities that align with

visitors' expectations for novelty, convenience, and therapeutic value. The findings underscore the importance of designing flexible and inclusive urban spaces that encourage personal reflection and social interaction, fostering transformative experiences even within familiar environments, such as theme parks or shopping malls, which serve commercial and social purposes in countries such as Malaysia. Moreover, the minimal cultural and spatial distance inherent in staycations can be leveraged to promote intercultural learning and spontaneous engagement while reducing the barriers associated with conventional tourism.

5.4 Limitations and future research

The study faced some limitations, mostly due to the sample size and structure. Nevertheless, since there is a scarce number of empirical studies that consider the complex nature of the resident/tourist dichotomy, the study choice of the international students was considered to be appropriate for this effort. However, future research could focus on 'pure' residents rather than expatriates, especially to examine their staycation patterns and contrast them to typical tourism behaviour. Future research should also consider a mixed-method approach, with reference to the journey mapping approach of identifying vital transformative experience touchpoints within the staycation experience.

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