Caught in the maze: Exploration of the 'tourist trap' phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This research note explores the intricate nature of tourist traps, going beyond the prevalent negative stigma attached to them. While the term tourist trap is casually used, only a limited number of scholars have investigated the intricacies of this phenomenon, and there is a scarcity of empirical research on this topic. Using a Reflective Collaborative Autoethnography (RCA) approach, this research note presents a reflective analysis of the authors' experience with the phenomenon. Through this exploration, we uncover insights in both psychological and tangible dimensions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of tourist traps. Expanding from the findings, this research note conceptualises the concept of a tourist trap from a dual-perspective framework that considers both supply and demand aspects. This framework goes beyond the traditional focus on product or service quality, providing a more nuanced discourse on the multifaceted nature of tourist traps.

1. Introduction

A 'trap' refers to a device, situation, or strategy specifically crafted to capture, deceive, or manipulate something or someone, often to gain an advantage or achieve a particular result (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Typically, a trap involves a mechanism or a set of circumstances that lead to an unexpected or undesirable outcome for the target. When combined with 'tourist', a 'tourist trap' takes on a unique meaning within the tourism industry context. Tourist traps are often mentioned in conjunction with and closely tied to tourist attractions and these places typically carry a significant stigma, serving as a cautionary note for travellers to be vigilant and avoid them (Dioko, 2021). This stigma, often negative, results from exaggerated expectations, elevated prices, excessive crowds, or a lack of 'authentic' cultural or historical value (Cohen, 1984; Dioko, 2021; Kruczek, 2010).

While the term tourist trap is casually used, only a limited number of scholars have ventured to investigate the intricacies of this phenomenon. For instance, Kruczek (2010, p. 3) defines tourist traps as "sites and activities meant to draw money from tourists". He characterises them as 'recognised attractions' often featuring 'kitschy sights' and frequently accompanied by various merchandise, including food, hotels, and souvenirs. Rather than associating tourist traps with tourist attractions, Kruczek (2010) made a clear distinction by explicitly highlighting specific features of tourist traps: (a) a predominant emphasis on luring

tourists at any expense, (b) an appeal to basic or unsophisticated preferences, (c) a deficiency in cultural value, placing them within the domain of low culture, (d) a direct intention to extract financial gains from tourists, and (e) a contradictory stance to the principles of cultural tourism.

Some scholars, on the other hand, noted tourist traps go beyond simply trapping tourists, suggesting that tourist traps are unintentional outcomes of stories spread by tourism promoters (Watson, 2013). Often based on jokes or falsehoods, these narratives create a lasting appeal around certain places, turning them into tourist traps. In some cases, tourists may unknowingly fall into these traps due to clever marketing or peer pressure, leading them to spend money on experiences that do not live up to their expectations. Moreover, another dimension is introduced, framing tourist traps as manifestations of tourism dependence (Buckley, 2012). This aspect is particularly evident in conservation efforts where the paradox arises when sustaining tourism becomes more important than the original goal of preserving attractions. Among these, Dioko (2021) contributes a comprehensive perspective on tourist traps, highlighting three key facets. Firstly, these traps are often crowded places like restaurants, shops, or streets, offering both positive and negative experiences. Secondly, they may not be destinations but rather stops for photos or to try local products. Lastly, Dioko confirms the stereotype that tourist traps often involve shops selling cheap souvenirs at high prices, exploiting visitors.

The discourse surrounding tourist traps in the existing literature provides valuable insights but often faces issues of generalisability and ambiguity. For example, Kruczek's (2010) definition of tourist traps can broadly apply to many tourist attractions in contemporary capitalist societies. This broad applicability raises concerns about the distinctiveness of these sites, as the association of well-known attractions with kitschy sights and commercial merchandise is not exclusive to tourist traps but can be observed in legitimate tourist destinations as well. Moreover, while Kruczek (2010) and Dioko (2021) offer criteria that aim to capture common characteristics of tourist traps, these criteria are often vague and open to interpretation. For example, Kruczek's characterisation of tourist traps as targeting 'unsophisticated preferences' oversimplifies the motivations of tourists and the complexities of tourism markets, which can exhibit diverse and intricate dynamics. Similarly, Dioko's assertion that tourist traps sell 'cheap souvenirs at high prices' oversimplifies the nature of these sites, failing to account for the nuances within the tourist trap phenomenon. Simply put, not all tourist traps conform to this stereotype. While some establishments may indeed capitalise on selling overpriced souvenirs to visitors, others may offer high-quality, locally-made products that justify their higher price points. Furthermore, certain tourist traps may prioritise providing unique experiences over tangible goods, such as guided tours, performances, or interactive exhibits, which may not necessarily involve the sale of souvenirs at high prices.

The use of the concept of authenticity to distinguish tourist traps adds another layer of complexity to the issue. While authenticity is a central concept in tourism, it is problematic to use it as a criterion for defining or characterising tourist traps. Authenticity in tourism refers to the extent to which a destination or experience is genuine, unique, and reflective of its cultural heritage (Wang, 1999). Tourist traps are often criticised for lacking this authenticity, as they offer superficial or stereotypical representations of a place, thereby undermining the potential for an immersive and genuine experience (Kruczek, 2010). This criticism aligns with Boorstin's (1961) argument that mass tourism results in pseudo-events, where authenticity is manufactured rather than organic. Moreover, the pursuit of authentic experiences can be co-opted for commercial purposes, leading to the commodification of cultural heritage and tourist attractions (Cohen, 1988; Park et al., 2019). Importantly, the concept of authenticity in tourism is multifaceted, encompassing objective, constructive, existential, and postmodern dimensions, and it evolves with changing consumer preferences and market trends (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). As such, the complexity of tourist traps extends beyond simplistic categorisations, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of these phenomena.

Although the concept of a tourist trap is significant in understanding the dynamics of travel and consumer behaviour, there is a scarcity of empirical research on this topic. Importantly, the reality of tourist traps reveals a more complex and nuanced phenomenon. This research note takes a Reflective Collaborative Autoethnography (RCA) approach to uncover nuances of tourist traps that are not fully addressed by the existing literature. By doing so, we hope to offer preliminary insights into the complexities of tourist traps and contribute to a deeper understanding of this concept.

2. Methodology

In this study, we employ an RCA approach involving three authors (named here as P1, P2 and P3) who collaboratively examine past experiences, sharing their introspective insights to construct a comprehensive collective narrative (Tripathi et al., 2022). Autoethnography involves the researcher reflecting on personal experiences to understand cultural experiences, making it a valuable tool in tourism research (Ellis et al., 2011). This method which intertwines personal narratives with cultural analysis, has been both praised for its ability to provide a profound understanding of experiences and criticised for being perceived as self-centred and narcissistic (Atkinson, 1997; Chang, 2016). Despite

these critiques, autoethnography challenges the dichotomy between art and science, serving as a bridge between the two domains (Ellis et al., 2011). By incorporating personal experiences, self-reflection, and social analysis, autoethnography allows researchers to explore into complex cultural phenomena, acknowledging the significance of individual perspectives and providing a platform for marginalised voices to be heard (Sparkes, 2016). This method not only enriches research by offering unique insights but also contributes to a more inclusive and diverse scholarly discourse by amplifying voices that are often overlooked in traditional research paradigms.

Autoethnography, when utilised collaboratively within a retrospective framework, as in RCA, allows researchers to collectively reflect on past experiences, share insights, and collaboratively analyse pooled autoethnographic data to uncover deeper meanings and patterns (Tripathi et al., 2022). This collaborative approach minimises potential biases and enhances the credibility of research findings by incorporating "multidimensional perspectives" contributed by multiple researchers (Tripathi et al., 2022, p. 4). By engaging in RCA, researchers can navigate ethical challenges ensuring that narratives are presented with sensitivity and respect, thus fostering shared responsibility for ethical storytelling and enhancing the credibility of research outcomes. This reflexive stance enhances the rigour and trustworthiness of qualitative research in the tourism field, aligning with the ongoing debates on the depth and reflexivity required for robust scholarly contributions (Manfreda et al., 2023; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

This research note is based on our personal experiences visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India, in September 2022. We hired a licensed tour guide during our visit who unexpectedly took us to a government-approved souvenir shop near the Taj Mahal. This unplanned detour was not what we had initially expected from the tour. After the tour, upon reflecting on our experience, we realised that it resembled what we had heard of as a 'tourist trap' phenomenon. Consequently, we decided to write this research note to document our insights. The choice of RCA for our research is suitable because our visit to the Taj Mahal or the souvenir shop was not undertaken with the intention of engaging in research, aligning perfectly with RCA's retrospective nature and its capacity to discover new knowledge from unplanned events (Tripathi et al., 2022). Our reflections were drawn from various sources, including our diary entries, visit memories, photographs, and the souvenirs we purchased. We actively shared and discussed these reflections among ourselves using the messaging platform WhatsApp, facilitating collaborative analysis. To systematically analyse our insights and experiences, we used a reflexive thematic analysis approach. This involved applying a six-step process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), to thoroughly explore and interpret the key themes that emerged from our collective reflections.

To give a brief about us, P1 and P2, both Indian males with prior visits to Agra, and P3, a female foreigner visiting the Taj Mahal for the first time. P1 and P3 have tourism-related academic backgrounds, while P2 is a non-academic with a software engineering profession. We maintain personal and professional connections with each other.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Psychological dimension

Recalling our visit to the Taj Mahal, we observed an interesting dynamic between the tour guides and the idea of a tourist trap. The guide led us to what he described as a 'workshop', emphasising it as the place to witness the intricate craft of *Parchin Kari* (*Pietra dura),* an art form involving the inlay work of coloured and semi-precious stones, widely employed to adorn both the exterior and interior of the Taj Mahal. He explained the technique, highlighting the careful arrangement of cut and polished gemstones to create decorative patterns on structures, typically made from marble or other stones. He also emphasised that the workshop aimed to preserve the refined skills passed down through

generations. Despite P1 and P2's local background and prior visits to the Taj Mahal, the guide's persuasive narrative, combined with P1's genuine interest in the subject, influenced us to follow along. P1 explained this decision, saying,

> "The tour and the guide's interpretations were really good. I said that because I already knew the story of the Taj Mahal and *Parchin Kari*. Also, I wanted to see the living conditions of the current generation of Taj Mahal makers. I had read reports about their challenging circumstances, so I saw it as an excellent opportunity to meet these individuals and express gratitude for their contribution to preserving such a craft."

Reflecting on this moment, our agreement with the tour guide's proposal was primarily influenced by the concept of trust. Trust is defined as a general belief in the reliability of another party's intentions (Chen and Barnes, 2007) and is an individual's "confidence in the goodwill and competence of others" (Casimir et al., 2006, p. 68). This trust plays a significant role in the guide-tourist relationship (Chang, 2014; Huang et al., 2010). Simply put, our trust developed as we experienced quality service performance from the tour guide during the Taj Mahal tour. This made us not question his intentions when he suggested visiting the workshop.

Nevertheless, upon reaching the 'workshop', it became clear that it was actually a souvenir shop. This unexpected turn of events left us feeling misled and frustrated. Adding to the disillusionment, the tour guide walked us to the entrance of the shop and promptly informed us that he would not be accompanying us inside, assuring us he would wait outside. We only reunited with him upon exiting the souvenir shop, further highlighting the disconnect between our expectations and the reality of the experience. However, as promised by the guide, there was a brief demonstration of *Parchin Kari*. Despite our initial disappointment with the tour guide failing to mention that it was a souvenir shop rather than a workshop, the visit introduced us to the world of *Parchin Kari*. An array of items, including tables, chairs, coasters, and religious idols, was on display. Witnessing the intricate *Parchin Kari* craftsmanship, not just on the Taj Mahal but on its own, added a whole new level to the experience, especially for P3, who is a foreigner.

Our recollection of this experience strongly aligns with Dioko's (2021) proposition that the phenomenon of tourist traps encompasses both positive and negative aspects. However, our experience challenges preconceived notions about tourist traps "selling cheap souvenirs and products but at high prices" (Dioko, 2021, p. 10) or those characterised by Kruczek (2010, p. 4) as "the opposite of the notion of 'cultural values'". Contrary to expectations, we encountered a shop filled with quality products that represent another distinctive culture of India, particularly showcasing the nearly extinct craftsmanship of *Parchin Kari*. This challenges simplistic narratives, highlighting the complex interplay of positive cultural representation and the pitfalls of commercialism. However, P1 questions the authenticity of the products as he notes,

> "They [craftsmen] made us sit in the sitting area and showed us how they laid the semi-precious stones in the marble. Then, they showed their wounds on the hand, explaining that this work is not easy. They used different semi-precious stones, like ivory and *Pāua* from New Zealand, to attach them to the marble coaster. But natural ivory is not allowed anymore".

Nonetheless, authenticity in this context is a complex and nuanced matter. Beyond the necessity of possessing specific knowledge to distinguish between what is genuine or fake (Elomba & Yun, 2018), it involves a meticulous assessment of production techniques. In other words, authenticity extends beyond the materials used, taking into account their legality and availability. Swanson and Timothy (2012, p. 495) note, "authenticity is almost always dubious, as … non-original techniques are adopted for ease of production, many details are ignored, or new details are added that would never have been part of the original object". In the context of *Parchin Kari*, the emphasis is more on

the craftsmanship, particularly the intricate techniques involved in its creation. Therefore, evaluating the authenticity of *Parchin Kari* products necessitates careful consideration of the extent to which they preserve the original and traditional methods of crafting. Simply put, the use of authenticity in discussions of tourist traps reveals its complexity and contested nature. As Wang (1999) argues, the term 'authenticity' itself is multifaceted, encompassing objective, constructive, and existential authenticity. Thus, applying the term uncritically to tourist traps ignores these layers and the potential for manipulation for commercial gain.

Reflecting on our experiences brings to mind the concept of information asymmetry, where one party in a transaction holds more or superior information than the other, creating an imbalance in knowledge or information access. According to Cohen (1984, p. 379), this knowledge gap gives the "host an advantage over the visitor". Furthermore, our desire for unique experiences coupled with limited knowledge makes us susceptible to falling into the trap set by the supply side, exploiting their monopoly on information about tourism products, services, and experiences (Murray & Kline, 2015). This insight suggests that locals, represented here by the tour guide, leveraging their deeper understanding of the destination, may capitalise on visitors' limited knowledge, leading them to less-than-optimal experiences. Most importantly, following the unexpected detour to the souvenir shop, our interaction with the tour guide concluded on a note of disengagement. Upon exiting the shop, the guide led us back to the waiting vehicle without seeking any feedback regarding our experience inside. This lack of interest in our perspectives highlighted a sense of indifference towards our collective disappointment and frustration. With a casual 'goodbye', he bid us farewell, leaving us to face the disparity between our expectations and the actuality of the visit, as well as the apparent disregard for our feedback and concerns. In this scenario, despite the two authors being local, trust in the tour guide plays a crucial role due to their lack of familiarity with the destination, exacerbating the condition of perceived risk and information asymmetry (Kim et al., 2011; Zillifro & Morais, 2004). This highlights the imperative role of trust in the tour guide, coupled with the importance of being informed, particularly for tourists navigating an unfamiliar host environment during their trip.

3.2. Tangible dimension

Another notable reflection when considering tourist traps is the clear influence of tangible elements in shaping our overall experience, particularly impacting our buying behaviour. Previous scholars often depict the tangible aspects of tourist traps as crowded places, usually encompassing restaurants, shops, stores, or streets (Dioko, 2021; Kruczek, 2010; Watson, 2013). However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the architectural design of these establishments. Recalling our experience inside the souvenir shop resembled navigating through a maze with a one-way flow. The layout, design, and arrangement of the souvenir shop contribute to the feeling of entrapment. To demonstrate the layout design of the souvenir shop, we created a schematic representation (Fig. 1) from our collective memories. The dotted line indicates our simplified navigation within the souvenir shop, revealing how the craftsmen/salesmen influenced our movement patterns.

Even though we initially had no plans to make purchases, the physical environment and the persuasive selling techniques used by the salesmen ultimately convinced both P2 and P3 to make purchases. P3 emphasises this, stating,

> "I had no intention of buying anything due to concerns about the weight of my luggage. However, the feeling of being 'trapped' in the shop with no apparent exit, and surrounded by salesmen, predominantly men, led me to make a purchase hastily. At that moment, I just wanted to spend some money and leave."

The above situation illustrates impulse buying as the spontaneous and unplanned act of purchasing influenced by shoppers' emotions
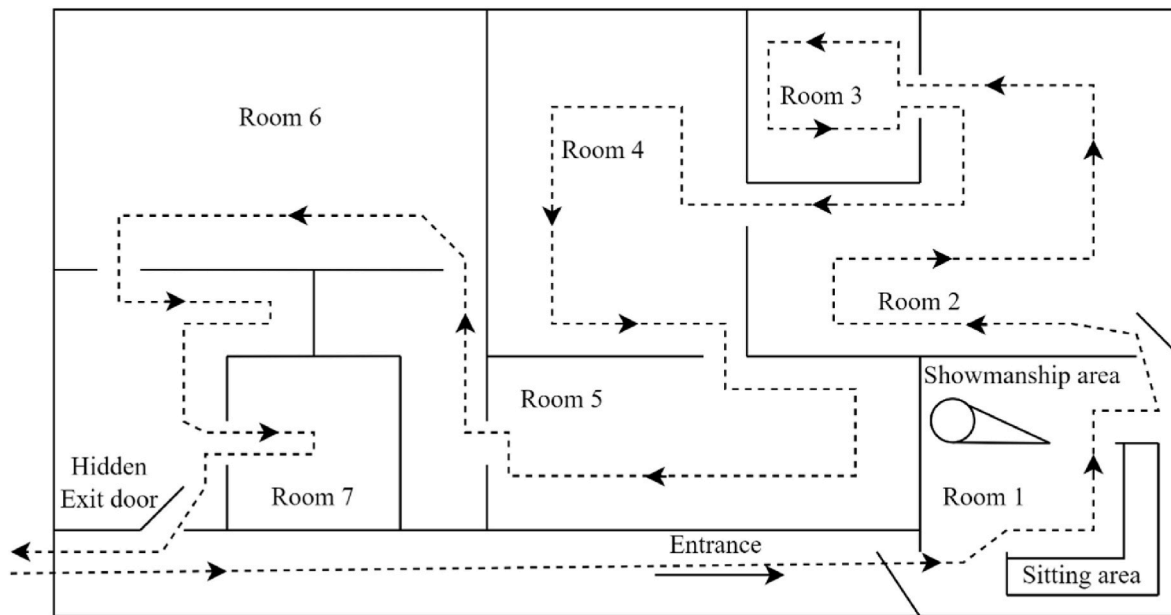
Fig. 1. The layout of the souvenir shop (Room 1: *Parchin Kari* merchandising station for visitors; Room 2: Massive *Parchin Kari* souvenirs in the display; Room 3: hand-sized *Parchin Kari* souvenirs in the display; Room 4: Indian fabrics with intricate work in the display; Room 5 and 6: Souvenirs made of leather in the display; Room 7: Billing room).

when exposed to stimuli that trigger psychological reactions (Virvilaitė et al., 2011). In this instance, the impulse buying decision was prompted by a sense of insecurity induced by the physical setting of the shop where the service exchange took place. This setting corresponds with the idea of 'servicescape', a term introduced by Bitner (1992) that refers to the physical surroundings where a marketplace transaction occurs, is provided, and is experienced within a service organisation (Zeithaml et al., 2010). The shop layout was crafted to guide and, at times, manipulate our choices and movements. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the layout of the souvenir shop manifests in one-way patterns, assigning distinct rooms to different products while presenting limited or confusing exit options. Instead of making the layout more accessible for visitors to spend more time and enjoy (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996), this design restricted our ability to navigate freely, making us want to leave the shop immediately. This indicates that the design of physical elements does not support the service exchange or enhance an effective and user-friendly experience for consumers, deviating from the intended purpose of the 'functionality' aspect of servicescape (Bitner, 1992; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996).

On the other hand, the impulse buying of P2 was triggered by the persuasive tactics employed by the salesmen. This serves as a notable example of the social aspect within the servicescape. Employees constitute a component of the environmental stimuli that shape a customer's decision to either approach or avoid, contributing to social interactions within a servicescape (Baker et al., 1994). P2 notes,

> "After expressing interest in an item, the salesman became more insistent. Despite my initial refusal due to the high price, he showed a cash memo claiming the item had been sold at that price before. When I said it was beyond my budget, they slightly reduced the price, but it was still too expensive. The same salesman followed me around, accompanied by others with calculators, suggesting different prices. Despite my repeated refusals, they continued, even approaching me after I returned to the car and bringing me back to the shop. Eventually, in the heat of the moment, I ended up making the purchase. The realisation of overpricing only occurred upon returning home."

In the context of our experiences, there is no doubt that the salesmen demonstrated persuasive techniques, which are often used to increase sales (Hogan, 2010). They engaged in storytelling, showcased

craftsmanship and utilised emotional appeals to create a connection with us. However, the thin line between persuasion and coercion becomes apparent when these tactics transition into persistent and forceful behaviour. The salesmen's relentless pursuit, continuous negotiation and bringing additional staff to pressure a sale exemplify the delicate balance that can tip towards coercion, leading P2 to feel compelled to make a purchase under duress. As such, understanding this boundary is crucial for ensuring ethical and positive consumer interactions within the sales environment. Additionally, the incident of overpricing exemplifies another example of information asymmetry, a circumstance in which "sellers are presumed to possess complete awareness of the situation" (Crase & Jackson, 2000, p. 322). This dynamic places tourists in a vulnerable position, heavily dependent on the information that is readily accessible to them.

4. Conclusion

This research note adds to our understanding of the tourist trap phenomenon and uncovers significant insights in both psychological and tangible dimensions. The interplay between tour guides and the notion of a tourist trap emphasises the significant role of trust in shaping tourist decisions. Despite being locals (two of the authors), our reliance on the guide's narrative showcases the influence of quality service performance in developing this trust. As such, these findings challenge the notion that tourist traps solely target tourists, as individuals with local backgrounds can also find themselves caught in such situations. Furthermore, this research note highlights the need for a nuanced approach to the concept of authenticity in tourist traps. While authenticity is often noted as a crucial criterion for enriching tourist experiences, its application as a definitive measure for characterising tourist traps is problematic. This complexity arises from the diverse interpretations of authenticity and the potential for its manipulation in commercial tourism, necessitating a more sophisticated and critical approach to evaluating tourist destinations.

Hence, we argue that information asymmetry significantly contributes to the phenomenon of tourist traps. With their deeper understanding of the destination, locals may exploit visitors' limited knowledge and trust, influencing their decisions. Additionally, the tangible dimension, especially the architectural design of the souvenir

shop, emerged as a crucial factor in shaping our experience. The maze-like layout, coupled with persuasive salesmen, led to impulse buying, highlighting the impact of the servicescape. Nevertheless, despite challenges, the overall experience was nuanced, encompassing both positive and less favourable aspects.

Expanding upon the findings, we formulate the concept of a tourist trap by considering both the supply and demand perspectives. On the supply side, a tourist trap is identified as a destination, attraction, or establishment intentionally designed and marketed to draw tourists and visitors, typically by offering exceptional experiences that frequently disappoint tourists but are not exclusively linked to the inherent quality of the offerings. On the demand side, a tourist trap represents a situation where tourists, often possessing limited knowledge about the destination, attraction, or establishment, unintentionally find themselves in an undesirable situation or experience that falls short of their expectations, somewhat resembling an unsatisfactory travel encounter, despite the potential for the overall experience to be enriching. This dual-perspective framework offers a holistic view that transcends the traditional focus on product or service quality, contributing to a more nuanced discourse on the multifaceted nature of tourist traps.

Future research could explore the dynamics of trust and information asymmetry within tourist traps. Moreover, considering the perspectives of tourist guides could provide a more holistic understanding. Additionally, examining the role of technology and online platforms in shaping tourists' expectations and experiences within tourist traps would be interesting. The influence of online reviews, social media, and other digital channels in guiding tourists toward or away from specific attractions could be a fruitful study area.

Impact statement

This paper explores the phenomenon of tourist traps, providing insights beyond the prevailing negative stigma attached to them. The results challenge the common idea that tourist traps only affect tourists, demonstrating that even locals can be caught in such situations due to information asymmetry. Additionally, the findings reveal a tangible dimension, especially the impact of architectural design on contributing to the tourist trap phenomenon. This study expands our knowledge of tourist traps and how they affect both visitors and local communities over the long term. The paper offers practical suggestions for government officials, businesses, and communities to address issues caused by tourist traps by proposing strategies to enhance the overall tourism experience. By understanding the specific elements of the tourist trap phenomenon, this paper not only assists scholars in gaining deeper insights but also serves as a practical guide for professionals in the field aiming to improve tourism.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Reni Polus: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Rajesh Nautiyal:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ashish Nautiyal:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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