

# 'Front' And 'Back Regions' in Historic Housing Tourism: Spatial Segregation and Proximity in Host-Guest Interaction

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**Abstract:** Goffman conceived a division of social establishments which he called region. A region for him was any place in some way limited by obstacles to perception. He distinguished two regions: 'front' and 'back'. In turn, MacCannell applied Goffman's classification to tourism. According to him, tourists show a special fascination with the 'real lives' of others. These 'real lives' can only be found in the back regions. MacCannell argued that, in the face of an influx of mass tourists, host communities seek to protect and isolate their culture by creating back regions. In these, the natives continue their significant traditions outside the eyes of tourists. Conversely, it is in the front regions that the natives perform a limited range of activities for tourist audiences. The tourism front region (or front stage) is, therefore, the place where hosts and guests meet and the tourism back region (or backstage) is the place where the hosts retreat, during the performance interval, to relax and prepare. This study aims to demonstrate the applicability of this concept to the interactions between hosts and guests that occur in Historic Housing Tourism (HHT). The results presented here emerged from a qualitative study in which 53 homeowners of HHT units were interviewed. The technique used for data collection and analysis was Grounded Theory (GT). In this study we found that, in the first phase of implantation of the HHT, which we called *improvisation* (1980s in most houses), the propensity for informalization was more evident. At this stage, there was a tendency to transform almost every region of the house in backstage. In the current phase of implementation of HHT, which we called *professionalization*, formalization begins to acquire more and more importance. Hence, there is a tendency to erect more pronounced front regions and there is less fluidity between regions than in the improvisation phase. From the theory that we developed, using GT, two properties of HHT emerged which we named 'segregating' and 'approaching' that brought an empirical confirmation to Goffman's theory. Spatial segregation is, thus, a means of preserving the intimacy of the HHT unit's host family. In an interdisciplinary perspective, this study presents preliminary contributions in the management of historic housing tourism and tourism management (e.g. companies and destinations perspective).

**Keywords:** back region, front region, staged authenticity, Historic Housing Tourism, Grounded Theory, post-tourism

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to make known the sociological theory of Erving Goffman (1956) concerning the backstage and front region and, in the wake of MacCannell (1973), to demonstrate its applicability to the study of the authenticity of the tourist experience that takes place in manors. It is specifically intended to confirm the validity of that theory for the understanding of what is happening in the substantive area of HHT. In other words, we believe that Goffman's regions of behaviour are essentially adapted to the way the guest-host relationship is processed in the more than fifty manor houses that are the object of analysis in this study.

In Portugal, Rural Tourism was completed as a pilot project in 1978, having been applied in four territories: Ponte de Lima, Vouzela, Castelo de Vide and Vila Viçosa. In 1982, through Order No. 102/82, the HHT program started (Pereiro, 2018).

HHT enterprises include accommodation in manor houses with elaborate architectural styles, refined and high luxury interiors and customized services (Beni, 2003). According to the Portuguese legislation currently in force (Decree-Law no. 80/2017), of June 30, HHT enterprises are: 'establishments of a family nature installed in old

private properties that, due to their architectural, historical or artistic value, are representative of a particular season, namely palaces and manors, which can be in rural or urban spaces'. The article no. 17, no. 2 of Decree-Law no. 39/2008, in turn, determines that 'the maximum number of accommodation units intended for guests is 15'.

This type of accommodation includes breakfast service but is distinguished from the British 'bed and breakfast', as guests have the benefit of staying in a house of classical architecture with members of the owning family, who are often direct descendants of the founders of the house (Edwards & Fernandes, 1999).

Initially, the development of HHT was concentrated mainly in the North of Portugal, where there is a higher population density. It is also here that the smallholding prevails and where, in the early 1980s, there were more houses in an accelerated degradation process (Bote Gómez, 2001 [1988]). This modality was constituted as a cultural tourism product seeking to expand the lodging capacity where there were no hotel facilities, or these were scarce (Pato, 2015). In this modality, until recently, the host family should live permanently in the manor, offering a family service to tourists (Monteiro & Carvalho, 2006).

## **2. Front and back regions**

E. Goffman (1956) designed a structural distribution of social establishments that he designated as 'front and back' regions. A region for him was any place in some way limited by obstacles to perception (Goffman, 1956). For him, in Western societies, a certain performance is usually represented in a determined region. In this way, the term 'front region' refers to the place where performance is represented, whereas 'back region' is the place, related to a specific performance, where the impressions targeted by this performance are consciously contradicted with all naturalness (Goffman, 1956).

D. MacCannell (1973), in turn, adopted the Goffman (1956) classification, applying it to tourism areas (Wang, 1999; Taylor, 2006). According to him, tourists show a special fascination with the 'real lives' of others (Urry, 1996).

In the case of package tourism, however, this does not apply since symbolic significance and self-reflection never succeed. This is because package tourists never abandon their daily behaviour. In this case, tourists remain connected to their home ('cosmos'), unlike pilgrims who are connected to a cosmos, external to their cultural and social environment (Cohen, 1979). These *real lives* that inhabit an external cosmos, according to MacCannell, the lives of Others, can only be found in the back regions (Urry, 1996). MacCannell (1976), called into question the ability of tourists to effectively witness what is authentic in the foreign cultures they visit. At most these would be pseudo-experiences - derived from pseudo-events, a term used by Daniel J. Boorstin (Burns, 1999). MacCannell argued that, in face of an influx of mass tourists, host communities seek to protect and isolate their culture by creating back regions (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). In these, the natives continued their significant traditions outside the eyes of tourists.

It is in the front regions that the natives perform a limited range of activities for tourism audiences. The tourism front stage is, therefore, the place where hosts and guests meet (MacCannell, 1973), that is, the customers to whom the service is provided (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986). Tourism back regions are the places where the hosts retreat, during the performance interval, to relax and prepare themselves. At the backstage, they hide structures and activities that may discredit the performance in the front region (Goffman, 1956). In it, the (staged) authenticity takes on a certain mystification (Olsen, 2002). If a stranger intrudes into the backstage, it will violate the secrecy, the intimacy of the hosts. For MacCannell, in Western societies, intimacy and closeness are of great importance. Belonging to the group means being allowed to share the backstage with that same group and thus get to know the others for what they really are, to see beyond performance, to know the truth (MacCannell, 1976). In fact, since Renaissance, the idea that the truth is external to the mind and spirit has prevailed (Graburn, 1989).

Nevertheless, the tourist is always given an inauthentic experience, under a cover of reality (Cohen, 1988; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) - although today, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic is increasingly complex (see table 1). The artificialization of the environments and the arrangements (tourist and promotional) of the places prevent tourists from clearly defining the boundary between: (1) the backstage regions (authentic and vernacular) and (2) the front regions (staged and artificial) of the social or cultural environments they visit (Fortuna, 2013).

**Table 1:** Typology of MacCannell scenarios based on Goffman's theory

Scenario	Behaviour regions	Explanation
1	It coincides with the Goffman front region.	What is shown to the tourist is pure representation, nothing is authentic. They are spaces entirely produced for the tourist. Those tourists who are looking for the authentic seek to surpass this region. It can be copied from one place to another. It is something produced in its entirety.
2	It is a tourist region with a front, but it has been decorated - made up - so that it partially resembles something authentic.	MacCannell gives some examples of restaurants that decorate themselves with objects that simulate what was previously the kitchen or the gastronomic resources of the region, etc. Souvenir shops sell certain simulation objects that serve to remember the place. The welcome is also sought to be done with a certain sense of tradition.
3	It continues to be a front region, but now it is arranged to look like an authentic region.	Not only are specific spaces created, but the entire environment of the region is also recreated to make it look authentic, including its activities, events, parties, etc. Sometimes everything is so decorated that it is difficult to distinguish whether we are in an authentic region or prepared for the tourist.
4	There are some authentic environments and others that are artificial.	Tourists can get in touch with certain authentic places, even though most of the activity takes place in artificial places where a replica of the authentic ones is shown.
5	The environment is authentic, but the entry of tourists is limited.	Tourists are only allowed access to certain places prepared for this purpose within the authentic environment, but they cannot enjoy everything, because it is feared that, if so, that will change.
6	It fully coincides with Goffman's back region.	In this scenario, it is shown the authentic reality, the daily life, the authentic culture of the hosts, who usually are not willing to reveal to groups of tourists in a massive way, since they can disturb it, and if this happens, it will cease to be authentic. However, tourists to whom it is shown, they are allowed to live the reality there in a genuine way. Analysing it is only possible through participant observation. This is the case of visits to certain indigenous villages, where only a certain group of visitors is welcome.

Source: adapted from Álvarez Sousa (2011, p. 148)

### 3. Methodology

Regarding data collection for the present study, 53 unstructured interviews were conducted (48 in person, 3 by phone and 2 by email) to owners of manor houses and 5 participant observation sessions took place in 4 of those spaces. The data was collected between 2011 and 2014.

From the houses under analysis, only a dozen was not classified as HHT when the interviews were conducted. This sample, which was selected based on the theoretical sampling technique (Glaser & Strauss, 2008 [1967]), is quite comprehensive since, in 2019, the total number of HTT units was 247 (PORDATA, n.d.).

The houses of this type of accommodation are small size enterprises (2 to 15 rooms). The vast majority of the interviewed owners' houses are from the old province of Minho, being the majority concentrated in the district of Viana do Castelo (21 houses). The municipality with the highest representation in the sample was Ponte de Lima (15 houses). The access to the substantive population (Hammersley & Martyn, 2019) was facilitated by a gatekeeper, the marketing director of TURIHAB (Historic Housing Tourism Association).

The interview included only two neutral questions like 'grand tour' (Spradley, 1979): (1) Can you please tell me about your experiences as owner and host of the house (X)? (2) How do you feel as a host? These questions were aimed at leading to 'verbal regurgitation' - i.e., 'instill the spill' (Glaser, 2001, p.175). In this context, we were successful when we conducted the interview using only two open questions or just one. The purpose of the first phase of the interview was to interview as many hosts as possible.

Data analysis was conducted only through a word processor (with regard to coding, writing memos and constant comparative analysis), dispensing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, since Glaser (2003) advises against its use, as it blocks theoretical sensitivity.

Concomitantly, we coded the interviews by writing down in memos the ideas that emerged from them related to concepts and their interrelations. This exercise led us to deduce who we would be interviewing next - i.e., theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2008 [1978]). The initially descriptive questions now became more

specific to collect data to saturate the missing categories. We wanted to confront the interviewees with sensitive information to take illustrations of testimonies made by other hosts and to challenge them: (1) Some people told me that ... (2) Can you tell me about ...? In this way, we have been improving our theoretical sampling, in an effort of theoretical saturation of the categories. This meticulous work involved several steps that intertwined iteratively: (a) open coding; (b) constant comparative analysis; (c) theoretical sampling; (d) identification of the core category; (e) selective coding; (f) sorting memos; (g) theoretical coding and (h) theoretical writing.

The field notes related to the interviews were expanded in the word processor and the line-by-line coding was carried out by asking the following questions to the incidents: (1) Which category indicates this incident? (2) What property from which category does this incident indicate? What is the participant's main concern? (Glaser, 1998, p.140).

GT is an iterative process whereby we analyse (i.e. code and write memos) each interview before starting the next, focusing our analytical attention on the host's behaviour in response to guest actions, to distinguish the properties of the guest and host concepts.

#### **4. Results**

In HHT enterprises, the front region is the meeting point for hosts and guests. Although there are certain architectural configurations that are likely to be used to support this division, it is eminently social. Based on the type of social performance that is put into practice in a place and on the social roles that are found there.

In our investigation of HHT houses, we found that, in some houses, the hosts informalized the service more than in others. We also found that, in the first phase of implementing the HHT, which we called improvisation (Braga & Sousa, 2021) - which coincided with the 1980s in most of the houses-, the propensity for informalization was more evident. Informalization, in the improvisation phase, took the form of a greater permeability of the host family to guests. At this stage, there was a tendency to transform the backstage in all regions of the house. This porosity of spaces is not possible in any home. This to some extent explains the tendency for the bedroom to be set up away from the most active part of the house (Goffman, 1956).

Now, in the current stage of implementing the HHT, which we called the professionalization phase, formalization begins to acquire more and more importance (Braga, 2016). Therefore, there will be a tendency to erect more pronounced front regions and there will be less fluidity between regions than in the improvisation phase. Thus, if at HHT house there are staff without linguistic competence to speak with foreign guests, or who are less socially suited, it will be confined to the backstage. On the other hand, the personalization of the service, which is more intense when the guest is a frequent presence and when he stays longer in the house, allows the guest to feel like a member of the host family. In other words, guests are therefore allowed to share the back region with the host family.

In this way, it is consented that the guests who are more sensitive to the concept of HHT (Braga & Silva, 2021) look beyond the mere professional performances of the host family, understanding and accepting them the way they are.

Therefore, in the context of HHT and tourism in general, people of the frontstage are those who are aware that they are creating an exhibition for the benefit of tourism. While individuals from the backstage are those who are absent from the limelight of tourism activity. Regional planners and policy-makers across the world are therefore imposing restrictions to regulate this hitherto unregulated business model (Vinogradov et al., 2020).

In HHT houses, these people from the back region can be either those who support the front people and make the performance in that region work (e.g., cleaning woman, mechanic, catering team, gardeners, etc.), or people who carry out roles that are not associated with tourism - e.g., workers, professionals, and peasants (Pearce & Moscardo, 1986).

Our study of HHT houses contributes to corroborating this theory and expanding it in some areas. From the theory that we developed, using the GT methodology, two properties of HHT emerged that we called 'segregating' and 'approaching' that brought an empirical confirmation to Goffman and MacCannell's

theorization. We found that the requalification of the outbuildings allows segregating insensitive guests to the concept of HHT (Braga, 2016).

In the professionalization phase of the HHT, there is a greater tendency for the physical separation of the guest rooms, to ensure the intimacy of the host family. Staying in the outbuildings allows to exercise more control over guests. The auscultation that is done to the guest will dictate if the guest will be the object of spatial segregation or approximation.

## **5. Discussion**

By re-functionalizing the house in HHT - i.e., adapting it to its function as a tourism accommodation - the owner of the house can restore the motherhouse, prohibiting guest access to certain rooms and reconverting the outbuildings. Thus, these infrastructures are converted into exclusive accommodation divisions. If the HHT is economically sustainable, this will be done without difficulty. But if the host wants to maintain the autonomy of the host family, he may not even implement HHT, manipulating public authorities (Braga & Dionísio, 2021).

In this way, when he finishes recovering the house - and with it the end of the respective financing of the political structure - the host can decide to end his dedication to HHT. Therefore, in the second phase of implementing the HHT, the professionalization phase (as opposed to the first, the improvisation phase), there seems to be a tendency to create spaces for the exclusive use of guests in the house (Braga & Sousa, 2021).

These spaces, as it is the case with the outbuildings, are closer to the typical stereotyped structure of mass accommodation (e.g., hotels). In this context, the owners and the family keep a good part (if not all) of the main house for themselves and, eventually, for the family's guests. Sometimes rooms are not rented, perhaps to safeguard a space suitable for the family. Thus, the layout of the building's rooms corresponds to the intention of combining family life and tourism activity.

In this way, the outbuildings enable the HHT to have another modality that allows for segregation and autonomy regarding meals and a reduction in contact of guests with the host and his family. In other words, it reduces the contact with the backstage area (certain areas of the motherhouse) to increase the enjoyment of the front region (i.e., annexes).

Thus, in the improvisation phase, HHT seems to favour the interaction between host and guests more than what happens in the professionalization phase. In this last stage, the hosts' refusal of the proximity of that contact causes physical barriers and some internal rules to be built. Therefore, the physical separation of guest rooms is a way of ensuring the privacy of guests and hosts.

If, in the improvisation phase, meals often bring together guests and the host family, in the professionalization phase there seems to be less availability for that contact in the commensality. As a result, guests' dinners become private in the outbuildings. Thus, spatial segregation is a means of preserving the intimacy of the host family.

In the case of a house with a greater capacity for accommodation, it will be easier to segregate. The interior spatial segregation is done as follows: separation by floors, opening the door to the rooms to the outside, creating outbuildings only for tourism. In some cases, when accommodation is provided at the motherhouse, some spaces in the house are reserved for the host's personal use. In these spaces, the host exercises control over the lodging - personal rooms, towers, offices. Sometimes, the host leaves them and listens to guests and finds out if they want his presence.

On the other hand, certain hosts define their own circuits for guests (interview No. 36). The inhibition of guests from circulating will be mostly tacit. However, when the houses have a valuable filling - which has not been bought on purpose for tourism - this inhibition will be greater. Although there are two types of spatial segregation between the host family and the guests in the motherhouse, by wings or floors, the owner can grant (almost) unrestricted access to the house, granting the guest the key.

*One of the things I do in tourism, when I do a house renovation, is to define areas for the owner. Circuits can be defined. A door that is closed. When the tourist comes, he will not open all doors either. The closed door is almost an understanding that he will not enter. The circuits are more for the owner's consumption. The room on the other side of the house, below the corridor, if there are tourists, I make another round so*

*I don't disturb them. The circuits are in the mind. It is important, when making the recovery, for the owner to better manage his relationship. It is done during recovery. [Interview No. 36]*

One of the strategies to increase the autonomy of the guests at the main house, is to create a false back region (Cohen, 1984): replace the genuine filling with one of a lower value. Within this strategy, there are also actions to avoid subtractions: not exposing small items, using surveillance systems, having full-time staff (interview No. 49).

*They can circulate in almost any part of the house, but the doors are closed when spaces are reserved for the family. We have two people permanently inside the house and everything that is small pieces of value are not exposed when there are tourists. What is there is hard to take home. Parts have disappeared. We noticed the lack of pieces and started to remove everything that was small. We have an alarm system and the permanent surveillance of two people. [Interview No. 49]*

In fact, as we have seen, it is possible to create passage circuits for guests other than those of the host right after the initial functionalization of the house. Another way to create obstacles for guests to pass is to keep the doors closed.

On the other hand, the closer the contact between guests and the host family, the more they will participate in their family life while they are staying. These will have a greater enjoyment of the house (more access to the back region) since they are already known by the host. Each host will present a lodging proposal that will include a component of greater or lesser approximation of guests to the host family and greater or lesser autonomy in the home. When the accommodation capacity of the house is very low, this can produce an (almost) absence of spatial divisions in the main house.

This will mean that there is no alternative but the loss of autonomy on the part of the host family. Guests must have almost full enjoyment of the house. Because, in the first phase, that of improvisation, the closer relationship between host and guest led, in many cases, to the failure of the first one due to situations of bad intimacy sharing.

This situation was due to the forced cohabitation that was established between the host's family and the guests. This was a time when the backstage was more permeable to the presence of guests (interview No. 10).

*Nowadays, competition from hotels... Today, the concept of marriage is no longer important. Today, people are interested in going to a space that has an environment and history. But most of the clientele is not interested in marriage. This concept of living like the 'landlords'. This concept of coming to someone else's home has passed to a low cost one. [Interview No. 10]*

Contrary to what happens in mass accommodation, in HTT the reception is familiar, so the guests sensitive to this modality (Braga & Silva, 2021) value the personalized service. They appreciate close contact to the detriment of autonomy and playful equipment, characteristic of massive accommodation and inadequate to the functionality of the motherhouse. In this way, the greater proximity of contact will depend on the dedication that the host is willing to grant to the HHT and on the desire for greater or lesser autonomy of the guests. A high proximity of contact can lead to the extension of the hosting relationship with the customer, but it can also be seen as an intrusion by the customer who wants autonomy. It is possible that, after listening, and since he sees that the guests in front of him are sensitive to HHT, the host decides to carry out a closer contact (Interview No. 5).

*We are a family that likes to receive. But it's not just about receiving and then chasing people away. Guests want to feel the employees and the service. There are guests who want a very close relationship and are very demanding! [Interview No. 5]*

## **6. Concluding remarks**

Through this paper, it became evident the confirmation of Erving Goffman's theory with what happens in HHT, an activity in which hosts and guests share common spaces. We believe that the theory we have developed confirms and expands MacCannell's staged notion of authenticity, presenting, however, some specificities that we have tried to highlight.

Although HHT is not “the gunpowder” for a rural renaissance and is still a controversial entity, HHT policy can be considered a way to revitalize rural societies around the world. There is a need for economic diversification (Robertson et al., 2020) and the use of endogenous resources, as necessary measures, to combat the harmful effects of rural depopulation and seek to instigate the sustainable development of these topics (Machado et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to create policies and measures that aim to induce a new development in these rural areas, especially in southern Europe.

We maintain, nevertheless, that this staged notion of authenticity is more evident in the first stage of implementing the HHT - the improvisation phase. In the second phase of implementation, that of professionalization, there is a tendency to adapt the accommodation proposal to the requirement of guests insensitive to HHT (Braga & Silva, 2021).

This type of tourist seems to us to be analogous to the so-called ‘post-tourist’, as it presents a greater awareness of the staged authenticity of the cultural tourism experience and is more interested in the entertainment that it can provide than in its educational aspect (Smith, Macleod & Robertson, 2010). Diversification is a very important element in the management and expansion of emerging products, such as HHT. Destinations depend on their main tourism products to motivate tourists to visit them. According to Machado et al. (2021), regarding complementarity, the pool is an important and transversal component to all lodges. However, the quality of the accommodation, games room, bicycle rental, spa, therapeutic massages, lunches or dinners, picnics, visits, donkey or horse rides, wine tasting also make up the range of complementary offer to accommodation. The attraction of tourists to certain destinations depends on physical, environmental, or sociocultural attributes as the main tourism products (Machado et al., 2021).

In what concerns the tourist who seeks authenticity in the tourism experience - and who was described in the seminal work of MacCannell (1976) – it is like the sensitive guest of HHT. In fact, his search for an authentic cultural experience includes the demand for what is preserved, pristine, authentic, intact, and traditional (Braga, 2016). The philosophy of hospitality present in the improvisation stage was in line with the motivations of these niche tourists. However, in the professionalization phase, to satisfy the needs of a more experienced and demanding market, it seems to us that there is a tendency for HHT to adopt a lodging proposal more like typologies 1 and 2 of tourism scenarios described by MacCannell (see figure 1). In the improvisation phase, the HHT hosting proposal was convergent with the scenarios 5 and 6 of this typology.

When we intend to compare a study elaborated through GT processes (Braga, 2016) with Goffman's theory of behavioural regions (1956), in the wake of MacCannell (1973), we may be forcing the data (Glaser, 1998). This fact can be a limitation to our study, whenever there is a use of preconceived concepts that do not fit the substantive area of the HHT, since one of the key ideas of the GT is that the concepts must emerge from the observation of the data. Nevertheless, we think that future studies may prove to be fruitful if they test the hypotheses contained in the concepts of “frontstage” and “backstage” in the more generic substantive area of Rural Tourism.

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**Cristina Cunha Mocetão** The present study aims to understand the leisure activities of Portuguese university students during the period of confinement caused by COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt as mentioned in our study that social isolation has had an influence on people's ability to manage their emotions, their routines and, consequently, there were also some effects on physical and mental health.

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