A Reflexive Account of Fieldwork Experiences: Interviewing Tourist Guides about the Meaning of Work During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Reflexivity is a methodological practice for qualitative researchers to show how their own subjectivity influences the entire research process by conducting self-critique and self-appraisal in order to justify knowledge creation. Situated within the axiological assumptions, values are an unusual albeit important subject of discussion. Positionality influences the decisions taken to conduct a study. This paper presents a reflexive account of the fieldwork experiences of a doctoral student undertaking semi-structured interviews focused on the Meaning of Work for tourist guides. Literature on unexpected circumstances during fieldwork remains limited and provided the impetus for this paper. Unforeseen contextual factors can alter well-laid-out research designs. In March 2020, the participants in this study, tourist guides, lost their source of income as borders closed due to the pandemic. The construct of inquiry, the Meaning of Work had taken on a different meaning, literally. Amidst the backdrop of a pandemic, this doctoral study proceeded to remain cognisant of the situation at all times. The method used to structure reflexive accounts was to apply four typologies of reflexivity focusing on contextual, personal, interpersonal and methodological reflexivity. Accounts presented include a short biography of the researcher, an appraisal of being an outsider with insider knowledge, the use of Zoom to conduct semi-structured interviews, obtaining a purposive sample, and selecting and gaining access to participants. Additionally, the relationship between the researcher and participants was appraised and provided useful insights on making choices. Interviews were akin to therapy for the tourist guides and the researcher showed empathy and respect toward their role in the tourism industry. This novel paper will be of interest to novice researchers who have yet to embrace reflexivity as a necessary component of trustworthiness.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Tourist guides; Meaning of work; Fieldwork

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative researchers embrace their subjectivity and project it as an integral aspect of data generation (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity is a set of continuous, multifaceted practices the researcher uses to consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes (Olos-Vega, et al., 2022). The value-laden nature of qualitative methods encourages reflexive accounts to enhance trustworthiness, specifically the credibility of a study. The contextual factors or global events of 2020 influenced not only the research design for fieldwork consisting of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The whole context of interviewing tourist guides (TGs) about the Meaning of Work (MoW) in year two of the pandemic was a unique challenge. Management literature conceptualises MoW to consist of three orientations: job, career or calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Interviewing experts can be daunting for novice researchers, but in this situation, the construct, MoW was in itself problematic as most TGs were unemployed due to border closures. Would they be willing to talk about MoW at a time like this? The first author's doctoral fieldwork experiences form the basis of this paper which offers reflexive insights that steered this qualitative study. This paper begins with the rationale for the research, followed by a short literature review on reflexivity, method, and moves on to the reflexive account. This is presented in four parts namely contextual, personal, interpersonal and methodological reflexivity followed by the conclusion. This paper is written in the first person, 'I' to denote the researcher as the instrument and to evoke resonance with the readers.

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

This section presents the rationale for the research and delineates the choice of participants, TGs and construct MoW. TGs are seen as leaders, translators, and tour organizers who manage a variety of group activities throughout the visitation (Poynter, 1993). Studies have emphasized this important role and consider TGs as essential stakeholders because they directly interact with tourists visiting destinations (Black et al., 2001; Walker & Weiler, 2017; Alazaizeh et al., 2019). Recent work identified the roles of TGs in the promotion of sustainable tourism in Turkey (Guzel et al., 2021) and in Malaysia, the relevance and significance of TGs in enhancing the tourist experience (Mustafa et al., 2021). TGs are employed in a unique industry and their lived experience of work would potentially produce good insights to enrich an understanding of 'work'. Formally, a TG is defined as "a person who guides visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area, [and who] normally possesses an area-specific qualification usually issued and/or recognised by the appropriate authority" (World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, 2003). This study was designed before the pandemic and TGs were chosen as participants and MoW as the construct of investigation for a few reasons. The first is the combination of supervisors from tourism and human resource management. Secondly, by 2019 TGs in Sabah were busy: the total visitor arrivals to Sabah in 2019 were 4,195,903, an increase of 8.2% over 2018 (Sabah Tourism, 2019). Secondly, TGs in Sabah include a large number of Senior Guides who have remained in the industry, some since the year 2000 (Borneo Eco Tours, 2020). The active number of TGs in Sabah in 2019 was 1,239 (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, 2020).

Meaning of Work (MoW)

Work can be viewed as a job, a career, or a calling. Individuals who view work as a job, value it primarily for its monetary benefits; those who view work as a career, value it primarily for providing opportunities for advancement; and those who view work as a calling, value it primarily for its qualities of meaning and prosocial value (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Working in tourism and hospitality is demanding and challenging, yet the literature does not present insight into how TGs view MoW, the measurement instrument has not been expanded in over two decades. Therefore, a mixed-methods study was proposed using an exploratory sequential research design to develop an enriched MoW framework by exploring elements other than the tripartite model of job, career, and calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), with TGs as participants. This paper evaluates phase one, the qualitative study which used interviews for data collection.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The value of talking to people in qualitative tourism research is a given and the interview method is widely used and valued across disciplines that contribute to tourism studies (Picken, 2018). "The three most common groups of people who are associated with tourism are tourists, hosts and industry and professional personnel" (Picken, 2018: 205). Interviewing any of these tourism-related people involves understanding certain practicalities: accessibility and willingness to participate (Picken, 2018). Tourists might be too busy and uninterested as they are on holiday. Hosts might be suspicious or otherwise willing. Tourism employees would also be busy and unable to participate. However, the opposite occurred and other challenges arose, namely the unprecedented events of 2020 which saw international borders close and tourism livelihoods decimated to naught. Could I still succeed with the proposed study at a time like that? Due to these challenges which influenced my fieldwork experiences, it was suggested by my supervisors that I delve into presenting a reflexive account to evaluate my positionality in this process. The next section defines reflexivity and provides a brief overview of this process.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY: REFLEXIVITY

A qualitative researcher needs to pay analytic attention to their role through continuous self-critique and self-appraisal by explaining how their own experience has or has not influenced different stages of the process (Dowling, 2006). According to Charmaz (2014), reflexivity encourages researchers to embrace their subjectivity in constructing knowledge. Reflexivity acts as a guide for researchers to explore their own positionality which influences all aspects of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a methodological practice, qualitative researchers need to reflect on how their subjectivity and context influenced the research design specifically choices and decisions (Crossley, 2021; Olmos-Vega, et al., 2022).

Increasingly, literature shares reflexive accounts. Rajaratnam (2018) explored how personal history shaped the choice of inquiry paradigms and methodological assumptions. Whereas Abdel (2021) focused on challenges faced, the importance of interpersonal engagement as well as self-reflection and how these narrowed built resonance with readers. Literature on unexpected circumstances during fieldwork remains limited (Abdel, 2021).

All researchers face challenges but the events of the year 2020 were unprecedented and influenced this researcher, participants and the construct of the investigation.

METHOD

In their paper, Olmos-Vega, et al., (2022) apply four typologies of reflexive practices suggested by Walsh (2003) to present reflexive accounts. Table 1 presents these typologies in column one: contextual, personal, interpersonal, and methodological. The focus of each is given in column two. The third column adds types of questions researchers might ask themselves about each typology as suggested by Olmos-Vega et al., (2022). In order to delineate my experiences, I apply these typologies to structure the reflexive account in the subsequent sections. The main source of information was my diaries.

Table 1: Typology of Reflexivity

Type of Reflexivity	Focus	Questions to answer
Contextual	the context within which a particular phenomenon emerges as well as the background of a given research study or program	How are aspects of context influencing the research and people involved?
Personal	the researcher, attitudes and expectations that shape the research project	How are our unique perspectives influencing the research?
Interpersonal	the relationship between researcher and participants	What relationships exist and how are they influencing the research and the people involved? What power dynamics are at play?
Methodological	the theoretical commitments that surround each research project	How are we making methodological decisions and what are their implications?

Source: Walsh (2003; Olmos-Vega, 2022)

REFLEXIVE ACCOUNT

This is a novel paper as the subject matter is methodological focusing on reflexivity or the role of values. Although axiology has only recently been added as a component of inquiry paradigms, nonetheless, "the question of values and what is intrinsically worthwhile underlies much of the decision-making on the part of investigators" (Hillman & Radel, 2018, p.12). Moreover, Hillman and Radel (2018) attest that reflexivity demands deliberate efforts to acknowledge, recognise and accept understandings of issues in the production and creation of knowledge. The following sections present reflexive accounts as suggested by Walsh (2003) and Olmos-Vega et al., (2022).

Contextual Reflexivity

I defended my proposal in late 2020 and proceeded to arrange interviews with TGs. The tourism industry and its employees had experienced some of the hardest times in living memory. International borders were still closed with some countries implementing bubbles but this was not the case for Sabah. The glorious days of chartered and direct flights from China, and South Korea and a bustling tourist industry remained at a standstill barring small pockets of domestic tourism. Most TGs were still unemployed. Against this backdrop, in early 2021, I set out to interview them about the MoW, essentially persons who had lost their livelihood due to an ongoing pandemic. Therefore, a key element was to ensure TGs felt at ease and would engage freely in the interview sessions. I was truly concerned about finding participants for my study. The other issue affected by contextual factors changed to normality presented next on data collection.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative researchers faced new challenges due to the pandemic causing unprecedented change and disruption to normality. For example, the implementation of the movement control order (MCO) by the Malaysian government and social distancing measures limited the the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews. Consequently, researchers were urged to switch from traditional data collection methods to alternative methods (Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2020). Two aspects of conducting the interview were unique to the circumstances: willingness to share experiences of their livelihood at a time when all were out of work; and conducting face to face interviews via internet-based applications.

As they were technically "off-duty", TGs could spare the time to be interviewed at their own pace. With technology (Zoom), this could be done from the comfort of their own homes. Zoom is widely utilized in Malaysia; it provides a free plan with capabilities sufficient for qualitative data collection (for example interviews), and it is simple to use for both researchers and participants (Chia et al., 2021). I share my thoughts about online data collection in Table 2. With restrictions on movements at the time, both researcher and participants were based at home. As such, the pandemic provided a silver lining for data collection. Such factors enabled rich and novel data to be acquired as TGs reminisced about happier, productive times in the past to a captivated researcher. In some small ways, the interview sessions provided an outlet for TGs to freely express their deeply rooted emotions towards MoW.

Table 2: Online Data Collection

Use of Zoom for Interviews	After obtaining consent from the participants, I scheduled the interview at a convenient time for the participants. I employed the Zoom App for interviewing TGs. Fortunately, 18 participants were willing to download Zoom, likely due to its easy-to-find profile and free plan. In comparison, only two interviews were conducted through WhatsApp due to unfamiliarity with Zoom.

Before starting interview sessions, I asked permission from the participants to record the interview on Zoom; I also used an audio recorder as a backup. I gave the assurances of confidentiality, highlighting the purpose of the recording is to produce analysable data via the transcription process. The transcript draft was used to check content accuracy with the original interview audio. The transcript was shared with participants at which time they could request to remove any content they no longer agreed with sharing. All the participants agreed, reviewed their transcripts and none changed the content. In fact, the transcript became a memento for the participants. Interviews were conducted entirely in English as TGs were fluent in it, while the national language (Malay) was occasionally utilized to clarify a point or express an idiom. This enabled me to transcribe the interviews as presented (English, Malay with pauses and emotions noted in brackets to help with analysis later).

Personal Reflexivity
This section explicates personal reflexivity which contributes to expressing how my unique perspectives influenced the research. Personal reflexivity indicates how the researcher's self intertwines with her understanding of the object of investigation (Peshkin, 2000). First, I share in Table 3 a short biography of who I am and my personal background. As a resident, I took great pride that Sabah was an international tourist destination, so I was glad to be given the opportunity to explore TGs and the MoW. I could not have imagined how 2020 would change tourism completely.

Secondly, I present my role on a continuum of outsider-insider in relation to the focus of the study. Prior to the Ph.D., I had knowledge of management theories based on my educational background and a predetermined perspective about tourism. In 2018, I enrolled as a doctoral student with supervisors from tourism and management backgrounds. They suggested I conduct interdisciplinary research combining tourism and management. The MoW construct was suggested by my second supervisor, and the focus on TGs came from my first supervisor. Their guidance led to the specific area I would focus on in my research. My interest began to flourish through engagement with literature that enhanced my understanding of TGs. Exploring the MoW in the context of TGs was exciting. It seemed to me that the voices of TGs were blatantly missing from the extant understanding of what is it like to guide tourists and how that influences their MoW.

Table 3: Researcher's Background

My Background	Who I am as a person and my own life experiences have influenced the courses I pursued at university. I am an ordinary girl born and raised in a small town, Lahad Datu, Sabah. I first came to Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital city to pursue my big dream of upgrading my

life. KK is truly blessed with beautiful nature, a coastal city, with the South China Sea on the West, enveloped by the Crocker Range in the East and diverse culture of friendly locals. Moving from a small town to the capital city ten years ago has shaped my perceptions and values. I view the tourism industry from a resident's perspective having witnessed an increasing number of tourists visit KK for countless experiences, activities on offer and as the gateway to Sabah's ecotourism treasures. Tourism is a crucial sector contributing to Sabah's economic development. I was a local who experienced fascinating tourism and hospitality services in the city. Through my own travel experiences, I observed that most domestic and international tourists were highly dependent on TGs to explore and guide their stay in KK. I became aware of the important role of TGs in influencing tourists' travel experiences. I wondered what made these TGs passionate about their job.

In Table 4, I present a short reflection on how my unique perspective influenced this study. Essentially, I might have been an 'outsider' but I had 'insider' knowledge. Being aware of my different roles, responsibilities and positions avoids what is termed as "the disorder and conflict involved in the process of doing qualitative research" (Dupuis 1999, p. 47).

Table 4: An Outsider with Insider Knowledge

An Outsider with Insider Knowledge	Sometimes, I saw myself as an outsider, a management student for ten years. I had read for an undergraduate degree in Management, and a Master's degree in Management, and now I was a Ph.D. candidate in Management. I, who completely lacked tourism knowledge had set out to explore the career of professional TGs. However, I was also an insider because I am Sabahan. This gave me insight into some of the fascinating tourism and hospitality services offered in Sabah. I was also surrounded by many friends who worked in the industry. As an insider, my personal experiences as a local Sabahan included hearing about the industry through family, friends, news, and acquaintances which guided my general understanding of Sabah's tourism situation. I never had the opportunity for hands-on experience as an employee in this challenging industry. I kept pursuing my studies at university. But I witnessed an increasing number of tourists and local people visiting visitor attractions in Sabah. Indeed, tourism is all around us in Sabah and this motivated my interest to understand these TGs, strong figures integral to the success of the industry.

Although I had no work experience in tourism, that did not hinder my interest and motivation to understand the profession of TGs. I consumed Weiler and Black (2014) to acquaint myself with the profession and other related literature at the onset. I shared these details about myself with the participants to demonstrate that I was interested in and had knowledge of their job field. This was my attempt to assume an insider perspective and it was useful. For example, when discussing TGs work-related issues, participants occasionally spoke about the courses they must undertake regularly to validate their license (for example, the Continuous Tourism Related Education). Prior knowledge of their training and career path had built the capacity to relate, gain trust, establish rapport, and create a comfortable environment for participants to share rich stories and experiences which strengthened the data. I would also hold peer debriefing sessions with my supervisors after each interview to reflect on how the interview went. In retrospect, this was useful to consolidate each session.

Thirdly, I present how I gained access to my participants, often a significant challenge for qualitative researchers. The nature and quality of the data collected, the members that the investigator can obtain, and, ultimately, the trustworthiness of the conclusions will all be affected by the researcher's success in this area (Patton, 2002). Gaining access to participants necessitates specific tactics suited to the researcher's area of expertise, study objectives, time constraints, and accessibility. Access to participants was made possible with the assistance and guidance of contacts and academic fellows (Okumus et al., 2007). The access strategy used in this study was the role and importance of gatekeepers which was most useful as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Gaining Access

Gaining Access to Tourist Guides	My first supervisor acted as a gatekeeper functioning as a 'hinge' between myself and the TGs. My supervisor provided the WhatsApp contact of the first

participant and instructed, *"you need to introduce yourself as a PhD student and the research purpose"*. This approach helped as this initial, personal access to the TG network known to the supervisor assisted with the almost immediate rapport between participants and researcher. I gained a few participants through this first TG forming one branch of recruitment.

I found another gatekeeper introduced by a friend who previously worked in a travel agency. She provided the gatekeeper's contact, who works as a tour leader responsible for managing TGs. I contacted the gatekeeper via WhatsApp again by introducing myself and the purpose of the study. Gratefully, the keeper was kind-hearted and provided the second branch of recruitment consisting of her TGs acquaintances.

I reached out to all TGs participants through digital communication, specifically WhatsApp. WhatsApp has opened new opportunities for better communication and fieldwork management to fulfill a tight deadline, and this has enhanced the project's overall quality (Jailobaev et al., 2021). Indeed, WhatsApp allows for instant communication (Mefolere, 2016). Fortunately, none of my participants expressed any apprehension about using WhatsApp, likely due to its easily searchable profile. One participant for whom I only had email details, commented, *"It is convenient if you could contact me via WhatsApp"*. The app was a mode of communication to gain access from the onset and for continued communication.

I formally invited and gained the consent of all participants who agreed to be interviewed. To acquire consent for participation, a detailed introductory letter outlining the research purpose was composed and sent via WhatsApp. Each letter was individualized with information on how the participant's knowledge and experiences will be vital for comprehending the topic. I clarified the reason for choosing to interview them: they were uniquely qualified to illuminate the research question *"How is MoW experienced by TGs?"*. The interview guide was sent in advance. Participants were assured their identities and personal information would be kept confidential. Such formality projected my professional behaviour and I felt established access.

Next, emphasis on the value of personal contributions to the participants is crucial to gaining access from the participants. As a student, I could not provide any incentives for the participants. However, in my letter, I stated, *"I aim to publish my findings in journals, and your contribution will help improve the livelihood of TGs"*. I also expressed gratitude by admitting how valuable their time, cooperation, and words would be to the study.

Finally, I share in Table 6 my assumptions about TGs, both before and after data collection which indicate how my own presuppositions were proven incorrect. Moreover, my newfound understanding of the value of these tourism professionals was priceless. I felt I had done justice to enriching an understanding of the MoW construct.

Table 6: Assumptions about Tourist Guides

Before data collection	I thought working as a TG was an easy job. I had engaged with the MoW literature from the start and the ideals seemed logical. With TGs, I thought the job involved bringing a group of tourists to the intended attraction and explaining its history or novelty. But after I started engaging with the participants, I discovered my presuppositions were incorrect. Being TGs was not an easy task. Most participants recounted the challenges they faced performing their tasks.
After data collection	I understood the depth of this job through conducting interviews and it truly changed my perception of TGs. These are professionals with a huge role in ensuring the sustainability of the tourism industry in a country. Most TGs expressed their feelings and thoughts that regardless of the challenges faced, they chose to stay in this profession because they love their job. Tour guiding gives meaning and positive impacts to their lives and the people around them.

As suggested by Weiler and Black (2014), TGs have a developing and mediating role: they are storytellers, interpreters, timekeepers, and even psychologists who contribute to sustainability and influence visitor satisfaction. The value-laden nature of this qualitative study, the closeness to participants and keeping a reflexive diary of the researcher's experiences was a salient aspect of data collection, analysis and trustworthiness.

Interpersonal Reflexivity
The relationship between researcher and participant evokes a discussion on interpersonal reflexivity. In this case, a doctoral student interviewing professional TGs produces situations that need to be managed by the researcher. In this section, I cover issues related to access, handling emotions and learning how to interview professional TGs. Although I was able to gain access to select TGs, there were also repeated silences and rejections. I received some silence from TGs in the midst of data collection. This caused low motivation and led to feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and misdirection. However, I soon realised the silences and rejections did not indicate failure but were part of the process. One rejection I received from a potential participant came through WhatsApp text: *"I am honoured to be invited, but I am so sorry I could not make it as I am currently up to something"*. Although I was frustrated by the rejections, I always thought positively. I sought solutions by asking if she could recommend a friend. She replied, *"Sure, I can recommend my other friends who have vast industry experiences. I hope this little help assists you"*. This, in turn, facilitated access to new potential participants.

A major hurdle I faced in interviewing TGs was being prepared to handle unanticipated emotions. Some participants expressed overwhelming emotions when they spoke of how being a TGs was meaningful to their lives; this was exacerbated by the issue of timing described earlier and the loss of livelihoods. Most of them felt satisfaction when they made a positive impact on the tourists they handled, as illustrated through one of the TGs' excerpts:

> *"So, I changed a gloomy person to a happy person [teary eyes]. That was the moment I could not forget as a TG"*. (Female, 55, Malay).

Besides that, some TGs burst into tears when recounting their struggles due to the pandemic and what motivated them to remain loyal to their jobs despite the challenges faced including loss of income. One of the participants said:

> *"It was an over-pressured job beyond my capabilities [teary eyes], sometimes I felt like giving up, but I kept going because I remembered my parents, my children. Life must go on; that is what I have always remembered"*. (Female, 55, Malay).

The method I used when faced with such a situation was to provide appropriate assistance by trying to calm the person down. Interviewees may be able to handle these feelings on their own at times, but an interviewer may need to intervene to protect the interviewee (Varpio & McCarthy, 2018). I remained cognisant that the topic at hand, MoW was being discussed at a fragile time in their careers.

Sometimes TGs say little, or responses are too general, or vague with some having difficulties articulating accounts of their experiences. I found this difficult to bear: the extended periods of silence, false starts, and the fact that the information may not appear to be readily understandable or relevant to the study's goals. For example, when asked, *"How important is it to experience MoW"*, one of the participants answered, *"Very important"*. (Male, 54, Malay). These moments left me feeling frustrated. Researchers are desperate to persuade the participant (who is likely similarly frustrated) to elaborate on their experiences (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007). Rather than excluding participants who lack the conventional qualities sought in the qualitative interview, I used the techniques of using probing questions to gain a more detailed explanation, *"Can you elaborate more?"*, *"For example, what types of challenges?"*, *"Can you specify what employment as a TG means to you?"*. This strategy was helpful to clarify a point and obtain meaningful answers. I also realised I improved as an interviewer through such experiences.

Interviews as therapy?
Amidst the pandemic, the plight of freelance TGs is truly unfortunate (Benjamin et al., 2020), yet they still showed interest to participate in this study. I attribute this to the sense of pride in their profession and the excitement that someone wanted to learn about their work-life as a TG. Noting the dire timing of asking them to share experiences related to the MoW, I expressed sincere gratitude for the strength it took them to be interviewed during this uncertain, low period in their lives. I also clarified that I needed them to focus their answers on how life was before the pandemic to ensure I captured experiences which would answer the research questions. In a sense, the interviews provided the TGs an opportunity to reflect on life, share happy moments as a form of therapy. Often tourism research focuses on tourists and host communities leaving out tourism personnel. The more I learnt about their lives as TGs, the more I empathised with them which is acceptable in qualitative research where we refer to our subjects as participants, or co-creators of knowledge.

Grasping Data

A few participants who met this study's inclusion criteria had difficulties providing thorough narrative recounts of their experiences. Others had no problems complying with the study expectations of uninterrupted and extensive descriptions. Although some participants' 'thin descriptions' raised concerns about the data's quality, I found when combined with stories from the more articulate TGs, there were crucial insights. For example, the TGs' perceptions towards MoW were the innermost core aspect of calling. One of the 'well-articulated' TGs stated:

> *"...you need to love the things you do to succeed in what you are doing".* (Male, 52, Dusun)

This thoughtful expression prompted me to look for similar responses from the "less articulated" TGs about their love for this profession. I found that several TGs had described this phenomenon overtly and I finally succeeded in extracting these descriptions surrounding loyalty to the profession. In this way, my own critical analysis of MoW was being enriched purely through the interviews and guided analysis.

At the end of the interview, I expressed my appreciation for their willingness to participate in this study, and for sharing their valuable time to help me understand their experience of work. I also informed the participants of a larger book project in progress that aims to document their careers as TGs. This study, to some extent, helped them relive the good days as they expressed feeling pleasantly overwhelmed that their contribution to the tourism industry was the focus of a doctoral study. As one of them commented,

> *"Thank You for your effort and interest towards TGs as I am aware limited study being conducted in this profession. I am looking forward to the book. Please inform me when this book is published".*

It is critical to emphasize the importance of participants' contributions to ensure prolonged engagement and build rapport with each participant that contributes to the credibility of this study. Each interview opportunity can be used to create and sustain a future connection. A report on the research findings was also sent to all participants for member checking to ensure trustworthiness.

Methodological Reflexivity

This study was conducted within a post-positivist inquiry paradigm with the intention to enrich the existing MoW research instrument. For this, a mixed-methods study with an exploratory sequential research design started with a qualitative study that would produce variables and measures to enrich the current measurement instrument. Phase one, the qualitative phase utilised semi-structured interviews which were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a thematic analysis. Phase two consists of a quantitative study to test the new instrument and is not discussed here. In this section, I present a reflexive account of the method in phase one, the semi-structured interviews. This was a pragmatic decision based on circumstances that have been delineated earlier and to stress the importance of phase one's qualitative approach. However, the norm is that reflexive accounts remain in the realm of the interpretivist inquiry paradigm (Hillman & Radel, 2018). The reflexive account here focuses on purposive sampling and being empathetic.

Purposive Sampling

A researcher must find several participants who are accessible, eager to share their experiences, and distinct for their accomplishments and ordinariness, or who can highlight a certain phenomenon or concern (Hillman & Radel, 2018). Finding, obtaining access to and establishing rapport with participants so that they might offer useful data is a crucial phase in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Essentially, participants must have personal experience with the topic being studied and be able to articulate their lived experiences (van Manen, 2014). For recruiting TGs, I used a combination of two approaches: purposive sampling followed by snowballing samples.

Purposeful sampling is a qualitative research strategy for identifying and selecting information-rich participants to make the most efficient use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). The justification of the chosen technique is to assure that participants' responses are meaningful and relevant to the study objectives (Mason, 2002). Moreover, purposive sampling enables the researchers to select suitable participants to provide an adequate answer to research questions based on the researcher's judgement (Paraskevas & Saunders, 2012). For recruitment, the criteria were participants who had been employed as licensed TGs for a minimum of 10 years and were based in Sabah. Participants need the proper expertise or are recognized to have unique knowledge to provide researchers with the information needed (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

Snowball sampling or chain-referral sampling is a sampling method where the researcher asks recruited participants to identify potential participants. Potential participants then provide the name of other participants, and this process continues with the sample growing like a rolling snowball (Patton, 2002). The reason for choosing this technique is that it is cost-effective and efficient to find participants that are difficult to reach (Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2006). As tour companies were closed down, the best option was to use this technique to find participants. Most participants in this study have more than 10 years of work experience as TGs and have the privilege to be acquainted with other experience TGs in the industry who met the selection criteria. At the end of each interview session, participants were asked, *"Do you know any TGs whom you would recommend I could speak with regarding the research topic?".* Participants were most helpful and provided the names and contact numbers of their colleagues. It was important to remain mindful of ethical considerations. For example, I informally invited potential participants via WhatsApp messaging service in the first instance by introducing myself, I mentioned who had given me their contact number, and the purpose of the study and gained their consent for participation. Appointments for the interview were decided either immediately, or in some cases, during the next communication.

As Interviews Conclude
Since losing their jobs, some TGs in Sabah have turned to selling food from their homes, retraining as insurance agents, working as Grab drivers, or grass cutting to earn an income whilst their livelihood was paused by border closures. Although the pandemic severely impacted this profession, participants were committed to returning to their job as described here by participants:

> *"I hope tourism will recover soon so that I can go back to work again", and "I miss my job.*
> *I hope things can return to normal"*. (Female, 32, Dusun)

Ng et al. (2022) contended that TGs may look for other temporary jobs for income, but they have no plans to change careers because they have a sense of pride in their expertise and experience. In this scenario, it is important to show empathy and understand how others are feeling to respond appropriately to the situation. Prior (2017) suggests that interviewers should pay more attention to the affiliative and empathetic moments in interaction. I showed my empathy by recognizing their emotions and responding with words of encouragement, *"Slowly but surely, the tourism industry will be back"*. My perceptions and understanding of MoW for TGs by now were at a completely different level to when I started this journey. I had found a great deal of respect for TGs which provided motivation for the completion of my own doctoral studies. I felt a sense of obligation to share the knowledge I had found to give voice to their stories. The reflexive accounts were useful in guiding the next part of the project, data analysis.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION
This paper presented a reflexive account using Walsh (2003) four typologies of contextual, personal, interpersonal, and methodological reflexivity to delineate how the researcher influenced and was influenced by this study. These fieldwork experiences focused on understanding MoW for TGs at a time when their livelihoods which were in dire straits. As a qualitative researcher, I operated within the boundaries of a value-laden study for which it was necessary to explicate how and why I made certain choices or decisions about this study. Reflexivity enhances the trustworthiness of a study specifically the credibility of findings. One limitation of this paper is I did not present a reflexive account of the data analysis process which could be written as a separate account. The experiences of interviewing TGs and the reflexive accounts presented here guided my analysis of data. This paper offers some practical insights on selecting, acquiring access to, and conducting interviews with participants. Insights suggest that the timing and topic did not reduce the richness of the data collected as participants who would otherwise be busy at work were able to spend time sharing their experiences in interviews. Next, the use of technology, or Zoom as the main mode of interviews did not disrupt the flow, richness of the data or quality of the conversations. The key limitation was the ability to be as human as is possible when we sit face to face with a participant. But that was not possible due to the MCO. WhatsApp was used for the initial contact, to share the purpose of the study and make appointments. Moreover, the use of snowball sampling in a way ensured participants were agreeable to be interviewed as the researcher was recommended by a friend. These aspects are sometimes left aside but can be vital in gaining access to participants and indeed breaking the ice. The qualitative research design motivates the need for reflection on how the hurdles of conducting interviews were overcome.

This paper has outlined some of the challenges and steps taken to ensure a thick, rich description of experiences was not compromised regardless of the situation at the time. Interviews are an essential tool that turns "talking to people" into data and is a fundamental method in tourism research (Pickens, 2018). TGs with their wealth of knowledge seemed forgotten by researchers investigating tourism sector employees. Future work could focus on these professionals and apply attribution theory to really zero in on how TGs make decisions relating to MoW. TGs are unquestionably mini ambassadors for any country in the world, as they project, among other things, enthusiasm, knowledge, perseverance, and sacrifice to ensure their professionalism contributes to the nation's economy and well-being.

DECLARATION STATEMENT
The lead author* affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted.

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