

# THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE IN GLOBAL TOURISM: BALANCING AUTHENTICITY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND ETHICAL PRACTICES AMIDST DISRUPTION

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## Abstract

*The global tourism industry is undergoing rapid transformation due to mass tourism, digital disruption, and post-pandemic shifts, leading to the increased commodification of culture. This article critically examines how the commodification of culture affects authenticity, sustainability, and ethical practices in diverse tourism contexts. Drawing on postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and sustainable tourism models, the study investigates the dilution of cultural traditions, environmental impacts of overtourism, and challenges of cultural appropriation. Comparative case studies, including those in Thailand, Italy, and New Zealand, provide concrete examples of the complexities involved. The analysis further explores the role of emerging technologies, such as AI, AR, and blockchain, in reshaping cultural narratives within digital tourism. Emphasis is placed on local communities' experiences and how regenerative tourism can serve as a solution for equitable cultural preservation. Policy recommendations are proposed to address ethical marketing, cultural rights, and the protection of traditional knowledge in a globalized market. This interdisciplinary approach not only highlights the challenges but also anticipates future disruptions, offering insights for policymakers, tourism practitioners, and scholars committed to sustainable and culturally respectful tourism practices.*

**Keyword:** Cultural Commodification; Sustainable Tourism; Regenerative Practices; Cultural Appropriation; Digital Transformation in Tourism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The commodification of culture in global tourism is a phenomenon that has gained increasing scholarly and practical attention. As tourism continues to grow worldwide, cultural elements—such as traditions, rituals, handicrafts, and local lifestyles—are often transformed into marketable products. This transformation, while economically beneficial for some, raises critical concerns about authenticity, sustainability, and ethical practices. In the face of mass tourism, digital disruption, and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of cultural commodification are evolving. This article seeks to navigate these complexities by examining the intersection of cultural commodification with global tourism trends, emerging technologies, and ethical standards, providing a foundation for more equitable and respectful tourism practices.

## **Defining Cultural Commodification in the Global Tourism Context**

Cultural commodification refers to the process of transforming cultural elements into commodities that can be bought and sold, often for the benefit of the tourism industry. This process frequently involves reducing complex cultural expressions into simplified, consumable experiences that cater to tourist expectations (MacCannell, 2016). For example, traditional festivals may be altered to fit a tourism-friendly schedule, or local crafts may be mass-produced to meet demand (Cohen, 2018). In the global tourism context, this commodification can both promote cultural preservation and lead to cultural erosion, depending on how it is managed (George, 2021).

The duality of cultural commodification—where it can serve as a means of economic development while simultaneously risking the loss of cultural authenticity—underpins the need for a nuanced understanding. As global tourism continues to expand, understanding the commodification is crucial for ensuring that local communities can benefit without sacrificing their cultural heritage (Smith & Richards, 2019).

## **The Era of Disruption: Mass Tourism, Digital Transformation, and Post-Pandemic Shifts**

The current era of global disruption has significantly impacted the commodification of culture in tourism. Mass tourism, characterised by large numbers of visitors converging on iconic destinations, has accelerated the commodification of local cultures (Russo & Scarnato, 2018). The effects of mass tourism are particularly visible in heritage cities like Venice and Barcelona, where local traditions are often reshaped to accommodate tourist expectations, leading to conflicts between tourism development and cultural preservation (Dredge, 2020).

Digital transformation has further compounded these challenges by amplifying the visibility and accessibility of cultural products through platforms like Instagram, Airbnb, and YouTube. These platforms have created what Cohen (2020) describes as an “aesthetic economy,” where the value of culture is increasingly tied to its visual appeal and shareability. This digital landscape has encouraged the commodification of culture in ways that privilege aesthetics over authenticity, fostering a superficial engagement with local traditions (Urry & Larsen, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new layer of complexity to these dynamics. The temporary halt in global tourism created a unique opportunity for destinations to rethink their tourism models, with some regions turning to virtual tourism and digital experiences as alternatives (Richards, 2022). This shift has highlighted the potential of digital technologies to either reinforce commodification or support more sustainable tourism practices, depending on how they are employed (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

This article seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. How does the commodification of culture affect authenticity and sustainability in global tourism?
2. In what ways has digital transformation influenced the commodification of cultural elements in tourism?

3. What are the ethical implications of cultural commodification for local communities?
4. How can regenerative tourism practices mitigate the negative impacts of commodification?

The objectives of this study are:

1. To provide a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of cultural commodification within diverse global contexts.
2. To assess the role of emerging technologies in shaping cultural tourism narratives.
3. To develop policy recommendations for ethical marketing and sustainable tourism practices that prioritise local community benefits.
4. To contribute to the academic and practical understanding of how cultural tourism can evolve towards more respectful and equitable models.

### **Theoretical Framework: Perspectives from Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Studies, and Sustainable Tourism**

The theoretical framework for this study draws on postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and sustainable tourism. Postcolonial theory, which critiques the legacy of colonialism in shaping global power dynamics, provides a lens for understanding how tourism can perpetuate or challenge historical inequalities (Said, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant in examining how Western tourist expectations often dictate the presentation of non-Western cultures, leading to the commodification of “the other” (Hall & Tucker, 2019).

Cultural studies contribute to this analysis by focusing on the ways in which culture is produced, consumed, and negotiated within tourism contexts (Storey, 2021). This approach highlights the tensions between cultural preservation and economic development, exploring how tourism can both empower and exploit local communities (MacLeod, 2019). Sustainable tourism provides a practical framework for addressing the environmental and social impacts of tourism. It emphasises the need for tourism models that prioritise long-term cultural and ecological sustainability over short-term economic gains (Bramwell & Lane, 2019). This study will utilise sustainable tourism principles to evaluate how regenerative practices can offer alternatives to traditional models of cultural commodification, focusing on community empowerment and cultural integrity (Richards, 2022).

### **CULTURAL EROSION AND THE LOSS OF AUTHENTICITY**

Cultural commodification in tourism frequently leads to cultural erosion, where the intrinsic value of traditions and rituals is compromised in favour of economic gain. This section explores the tensions between economic incentives and cultural preservation, highlighting how commodification can transform and, in some cases, distort traditional practices. A case study on the Karen women of Thailand offers a concrete example of this phenomenon, while strategies for culturally sensitive tourism development and a comparative analysis of authenticity in different contexts provide a broader understanding of the challenges and potential solutions.

## **The Impact of Commodification on Traditional Practices and Rituals**

The commodification of culture often necessitates alterations to traditional practices, which can diminish their authenticity and cultural significance. This process is particularly evident in tourism, where traditions are frequently adapted to meet the expectations and consumption patterns of international visitors (Henderson, 2019). For example, rituals that were historically private or sacred may be recontextualised as public performances for tourists, leading to a loss of original meaning and relevance (Su, 2020). In some cases, the need to cater to a global audience has resulted in the standardisation of cultural expressions, where complex and varied traditions are simplified for easier consumption (George, 2021).

The shift from culture as lived experience to culture as spectacle is central to the commodification debate. When traditions are monetised, the potential for cultural erosion increases, as financial motivations may outweigh the desire to maintain cultural integrity (Hitchcock, 2022). The consequences are not merely symbolic but have tangible effects on how local communities perceive and practice their own traditions. In many instances, younger generations may adopt a diluted version of their cultural heritage, influenced by the expectations of tourism markets (Cohen, 2018).

### **Case Study: The Karen Women of Thailand – From Tradition to Tourism Spectacle**

A prominent example of cultural commodification can be found in the case of the Karen women in Thailand, often referred to as the “Long Neck” women. Historically, the Karen women wore brass rings around their necks as part of a cultural practice linked to their identity. However, as tourism developed in northern Thailand, this traditional practice became a major attraction, transforming the Karen villages into tourist destinations (Richards, 2022).

Tourists visit these villages to observe and photograph the Karen women, often paying for guided tours that reduce their cultural identity to a spectacle (Hitchcock, 2022). The commercialisation of their traditions has led to ethical concerns, as the practice of wearing rings is now maintained primarily for the benefit of tourism rather than cultural preservation. There are economic inequalities at play, as local communities often receive minimal financial benefit compared to tour operators and external stakeholders (Cohen, 2020).

This commodification raises questions about authenticity and exploitation. While the visibility of Karen culture has increased, the deeper meanings associated with their traditions are often overshadowed by the commercial motives of the tourism industry. Critics argue that this transformation has led to a loss of cultural agency, as the Karen women’s traditions are no longer practised for their original purposes but have become products for international consumption (Su, 2020).

### **Preserving Authenticity: Strategies for Culturally Sensitive Tourism Development**

Addressing the challenges of cultural commodification requires strategies that prioritise cultural integrity and respect for local traditions. Culturally sensitive tourism development can mitigate the negative impacts of commodification by

promoting authentic engagement rather than superficial consumption (George, 2021). One such approach involves participatory tourism models, where local communities are actively involved in decision-making processes about how their culture is presented and marketed (Henderson, 2019).

Empowering local communities to retain control over cultural narratives can help ensure that tourism benefits are equitably distributed, and cultural heritage is preserved. This includes initiatives like community-based tourism, where local residents guide tours, provide insights into cultural practices, and set boundaries for what can and cannot be commodified (Su, 2020). Ethical marketing also plays a critical role, with tourism campaigns needing to prioritise education and awareness over sensationalism, offering tourists a more nuanced understanding of local cultures (Cohen, 2020).

Training and education programmes for both tourists and local stakeholders are crucial for fostering respect and understanding. These programmes can address misconceptions, challenge stereotypes, and promote cultural preservation as a shared responsibility between visitors and hosts (Richards, 2022). By focusing on authenticity and collaboration, tourism can contribute to cultural preservation rather than cultural erosion.

### **Comparative Analysis: Authenticity in Tourism Across Different Cultures**

Cultural authenticity in tourism is a contentious issue that varies significantly across different contexts. In some regions, commodification has led to the dilution of cultural practices, while in others, it has provided an opportunity for cultural revival and economic development (George, 2021). For example, in New Zealand, the promotion of Māori culture through tourism has been met with both praise and criticism. Some view it as a successful model of cultural preservation that has allowed Māori communities to share their heritage on their own terms, while others argue that it still risks essentialising Māori identity for the sake of tourism (Hitchcock, 2022).

Comparing the Karen women's experience with other cases highlights the complexities of cultural commodification. While both groups have experienced the pressures of tourism-driven commodification, the outcomes depend largely on the level of community involvement and control. In regions where local communities have a strong voice in the tourism process, there tends to be a greater focus on authenticity and cultural preservation (Cohen, 2018). In contrast, areas where external entities dominate the tourism narrative often witness higher degrees of cultural erosion (Henderson, 2019).

### **OVERTOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION**

The phenomenon of overtourism—where excessive numbers of visitors converge on popular destinations—has become a significant concern in global tourism. This section examines the pressures overtourism places on heritage sites, using Venice as a case study, while also exploring best practices to mitigate environmental impacts. Quantitative analysis highlights the economic benefits and environmental costs associated with this complex issue.

## **The Role of Globalization in Overtourism: Pressure on Heritage Sites**

Globalization has played a crucial role in the rise of overtourism, driven by increased international mobility, greater affordability of air travel, and aggressive digital marketing by tourism boards (Milano et al., 2019). The widespread accessibility of tourism destinations through social media platforms has contributed to the growing appeal of certain iconic heritage sites, drawing large numbers of visitors who seek to experience well-publicised attractions (Seraphin et al., 2020). As a result, many cultural and natural heritage sites have become overwhelmed by visitor numbers, leading to the degradation of both physical structures and local cultural environments.

Heritage sites are particularly vulnerable to overtourism due to their historic and cultural significance, which makes them attractive to both international and domestic tourists. The increase in low-cost travel options and the rise of digital platforms like Instagram and TripAdvisor have exacerbated the trend, transforming unique cultural landmarks into "must-see" destinations (UNWTO, 2019). The result is a paradox: while tourism contributes significantly to local economies, it also poses threats to the very sites it seeks to celebrate, leading to concerns over sustainability and preservation (Seraphin & Yallop, 2021).

### **Case Study: Venice and the Consequences of Overtourism**

Venice serves as a prime example of the challenges associated with overtourism. The city, known for its historic canals, Renaissance architecture, and unique cultural heritage, has long been a magnet for global tourism. However, the influx of tourists—peaking at over 30 million annual visitors pre-pandemic—has placed severe pressure on the city's infrastructure, environment, and local population (Russo & Scarnato, 2018).

Overtourism in Venice has led to significant environmental degradation, including damage to the lagoon ecosystem and the foundations of historical buildings, primarily due to the increased water traffic and wave action from motorised vessels (Davis & Marvin, 2020). The rise in short term rental platforms such as Airbnb has contributed to a housing crisis, with local residents being displaced by accommodation catering to tourists. This shift has transformed Venice's urban landscape, leading to the commodification of its culture and the erosion of local traditions (Milano et al., 2019).

Efforts to manage overtourism in Venice have included implementing entry fees for day visitors, restricting large cruise ships, and developing "smart tourism" strategies that use data analytics to monitor and control visitor flows (Dredge & Jamal, 2020). Despite these efforts, the challenge remains in finding a balance between economic benefits and the preservation of cultural and environmental integrity.

### **Policy Approaches to Mitigate Environmental Impact: Best Practices and Innovations**

Mitigating the environmental impact of overtourism requires a multifaceted approach, combining policy interventions with innovative practices. Sustainable tourism models, which aim to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives,

are central to these efforts (Butler, 2019). In the context of heritage sites, policies such as visitor caps, timed ticketing, and off-peak promotions have proven effective in managing tourist flows while minimising congestion and degradation (Milano et al., 2019).

Technological innovations also play a crucial role in addressing overtourism. The use of real-time data analytics, facilitated by smart tourism platforms, enables destination managers to make informed decisions about visitor management (Seraphin & Yallop, 2021). For example, digital applications that provide tourists with real-time information on crowded areas encourage the dispersal of visitors to less frequented sites, alleviating pressure on overburdened locations.

Educational campaigns that promote responsible tourism and highlight the environmental impact of visitor behaviours are also vital. Such initiatives encourage tourists to engage in sustainable practices, such as respecting local customs, reducing waste, and choosing eco-friendly accommodation options (Butler, 2019). Effective policy approaches require collaboration between local governments, tourism boards, and the private sector to ensure that tourism growth is managed in a way that prioritises long-term sustainability.

### **Quantitative Analysis: Tourist Numbers, Economic Benefits, and Environmental Costs**

Quantitative data highlights the dual nature of tourism's impact on heritage sites. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019), international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion in 2019, with a significant portion of these visits concentrated in heritage destinations. This influx has contributed positively to local economies, generating revenue and employment opportunities. In Venice, tourism accounts for a substantial percentage of the city's GDP, providing jobs for thousands of residents and supporting local businesses (Russo & Scarnato, 2018).

However, these economic benefits are often accompanied by environmental costs. Studies indicate that high visitor numbers contribute to increased carbon emissions, water pollution, and habitat destruction in heritage areas (Davis & Marvin, 2020). The rise in motorised transport in Venice, for example, has been linked to erosion of the city's canal walls, necessitating costly restoration projects (Butler, 2019). These environmental challenges raise important questions about the sustainability of mass tourism and the need for more rigorous impact assessments.

Balancing the economic gains from tourism with the costs of environmental degradation requires a shift towards more sustainable and regenerative tourism models. These models emphasise not only the preservation of cultural heritage but also the restoration of natural ecosystems impacted by tourism activities (Dredge & Jamal, 2020). Quantitative analysis serves as a crucial tool in this effort, enabling stakeholders to evaluate the trade-offs involved in tourism management and to develop evidence-based policies that promote a more sustainable future.

### **CULTURAL APPROPRIATION VS. APPRECIATION IN TOURISM**

Cultural appropriation and appreciation in tourism represent a contentious yet critical issue as global travellers seek authentic cultural experiences. This section

explores the boundaries between appropriation and appreciation, providing a framework for understanding when cultural tourism crosses the line into exploitation. A case study of the misuse of Native American symbols in U.S. tourism highlights the complexities of this debate, while ethical marketing frameworks offer guidelines for respectful representation. A comparative analysis of cultural tourism across different continents illustrates the varying impacts of commodification.

### **Defining Boundaries: When Does Cultural Tourism Become Appropriation?**

Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of a culture, particularly those of a historically marginalised group, are borrowed or used without permission, understanding, or respect for their significance. This often happens in tourism, where cultural symbols, rituals, or attire are utilised as marketing tools to attract visitors, frequently resulting in stereotypes or misrepresentations (George, 2021). Cultural appropriation in tourism can lead to the erosion of meaning, as sacred or culturally significant symbols are stripped of their original context for commercial purposes (Cohen, 2020).

In contrast, cultural appreciation involves a respectful and informed engagement with another culture, acknowledging its complexity, significance, and context. Tourism operators and visitors alike face challenges in navigating this boundary, as the desire for cultural immersion can sometimes overshadow considerations of respect and authenticity (Zarkia & Kenter, 2018). Establishing clear guidelines on what constitutes respectful cultural interaction is essential for preventing appropriation, particularly in the context of global tourism, where power imbalances between tourists and host communities often exist (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

### **Case Study: Misuse of Native American Symbols in U.S. Tourism Marketing**

A significant example of cultural appropriation in tourism can be seen in the misuse of Native American symbols within the United States. Many tourism campaigns have employed indigenous imagery – such as headdresses, totems, and tribal motifs – without consulting the relevant communities or respecting the cultural significance of these symbols (Nash, 2020). This practice has commodified Native American culture, reducing it to a collection of exotic stereotypes that are more appealing to tourists than the complex, living traditions they represent.

The consequences of such appropriation are profound. Indigenous groups have argued that the commercialisation of their cultural symbols for tourism not only disrespects their heritage but also perpetuates historical injustices and marginalisation (Smith & Richards, 2019). The misuse of sacred objects like ceremonial headdresses, often seen at music festivals or tourist attractions, exemplifies how tourism can exploit cultural elements for profit, leading to distorted representations of indigenous identity (Coleman, 2021). In response, Native American communities have called for greater autonomy over their cultural narratives and stricter regulations on the use of indigenous symbols in tourism marketing.

### **Ethical Marketing Frameworks: Guidelines for Respectful Cultural Representation**

Ethical marketing in tourism is crucial for promoting a balanced and respectful engagement with diverse cultures. Developing ethical frameworks can help tourism operators avoid cultural appropriation while fostering genuine appreciation. These frameworks should emphasise collaboration with local communities, ensuring that they have a voice in how their culture is represented and marketed to a global audience (Zarkia & Kenter, 2018).

Key principles of ethical marketing include obtaining consent from cultural stakeholders, avoiding stereotypes, and recognising the dynamic nature of cultures that cannot be reduced to static symbols (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Training tourism professionals on cultural sensitivity, particularly those involved in marketing and tour guiding, is vital for ensuring that cultural narratives are portrayed accurately and respectfully (Smith & Richards, 2019).

Another aspect of ethical marketing involves providing educational content that highlights the historical and social contexts of cultural practices. This approach can elevate tourist understanding and move beyond superficial consumption to meaningful cultural engagement (Cohen, 2020). Revenue-sharing models that allocate a portion of tourism profits to local communities can support cultural preservation and ensure that communities benefit economically from tourism (Coleman, 2021).

### **Comparative Case Study: Appreciation and Appropriation Across Continents**

The distinction between cultural appropriation and appreciation varies significantly across different regions and cultural contexts. In Japan, for instance, the commodification of traditional dress, such as the kimono, has been embraced to an extent, as it supports cultural industries and offers economic benefits (Stevens, 2022). Some Japanese cultural practitioners view this form of commodification as an opportunity for cultural revival and international recognition, provided it is managed respectfully (Stevens, 2022).

In contrast, indigenous communities in Australia have expressed concerns about the appropriation of Aboriginal symbols in tourism, often used without consent or understanding of their significance (Hollinshead, 2020). In these cases, the lack of community involvement and consultation has led to accusations of exploitation, as cultural symbols are frequently utilised by external actors for profit, with little regard for their deeper meanings.

Comparing these scenarios illustrates that cultural tourism can either contribute to cultural revitalisation or perpetuate appropriation, depending on the level of community involvement and control (Nash, 2020). Successful examples of cultural appreciation involve collaboration, respect, and a willingness to educate tourists about the complexities of the culture they are engaging with (Smith & Richards, 2019). These principles should guide the development of tourism practices that honour, rather than exploit, the cultures they showcase.

### **PANDEMIC AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF TOURISM**

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated the digital transformation of the tourism industry, introducing virtual tourism as a viable

alternative to traditional travel. This section explores the rise of virtual tourism and its cultural implications, examines the shift to virtual museum tours during the pandemic, assesses the balance between digital innovation and cultural preservation, and considers the potential roles of emerging technologies such as AI, AR, and blockchain in the future of tourism.

### **The Rise of Virtual Tourism and Its Cultural Implications**

The restrictions on travel during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in virtual tourism, with many institutions and destinations offering digital experiences to engage audiences who could not travel physically. Virtual tourism encompasses a range of digital experiences, from virtual reality (VR) simulations of historical sites to online guided tours that provide interactive exploration of destinations (Guttentag, 2021). While virtual tourism has opened up cultural experiences to a broader audience, it raises questions about authenticity and the potential loss of the sensory and immersive qualities that come with physical presence (Richards, 2022).

One key concern is whether virtual tourism can adequately capture the cultural essence of a destination. The shift from in-person to online experiences often results in the commodification of culture, where complex traditions and histories are simplified to fit digital formats (Fuchs & Reichel, 2021). The emphasis on visual aesthetics in virtual tourism can lead to a reductionist view of culture, prioritising what is visually appealing over what is culturally significant (Walker & Morrison, 2021). Despite these challenges, virtual tourism has the potential to offer inclusive and accessible experiences, particularly for individuals who are unable to travel due to physical or financial constraints (Guttentag, 2021).

### **Case Study: The Shift to Virtual Museum Tours During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Museums were among the first cultural institutions to embrace virtual tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with closures and travel restrictions, museums around the world adapted by offering virtual tours, enabling global audiences to engage with their collections online. Institutions such as the Louvre in Paris and the Uffizi Gallery in Florence launched comprehensive digital experiences, ranging from high-resolution images of artworks to interactive, 3D-rendered exhibitions (Tesoriero et al., 2021).

While virtual museum tours provided a lifeline for cultural engagement during the pandemic, they also highlighted limitations in replicating the experience of visiting a museum in person. Critics argue that the tactile and spatial dimensions of museum visits – such as observing the scale of an artwork or feeling the atmosphere of an exhibition space – are lost in virtual formats (Tesoriero et al., 2021). On the other hand, museums have reported increased digital engagement and accessibility, reaching new demographics who might not have been able to visit in person (Richards, 2022). This case underscores the potential for virtual tourism to expand access while raising questions about the quality and authenticity of digital experiences.

## **Balancing Digital Innovation with Cultural Preservation: A Critical Analysis**

The challenge of balancing digital innovation with cultural preservation is a central issue in the digital transformation of tourism. While digital tools enable broader access to cultural heritage, there is a risk that the digitisation of culture could lead to superficial or commodified representations, undermining the depth and authenticity of traditional experiences (Fuchs & Reichel, 2021). To address this, digital platforms must prioritise collaboration with local communities and cultural experts, ensuring that digital content is accurate, respectful, and contextually grounded (Walker & Morrison, 2021).

Ethical considerations should guide the development of virtual tourism platforms, with a focus on preserving the integrity of cultural narratives. This involves implementing standards for content creation that involve cultural stakeholders in decision-making processes, as well as using digital tools to enhance rather than replace traditional experiences (Richards, 2022). Hybrid models that combine physical and virtual experiences may offer a way forward, allowing visitors to engage with culture both online and in person, depending on their circumstances (Guttentag, 2021).

## **Emerging Technologies: The Role of AI, AR, and Blockchain in Tourism**

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), and blockchain are poised to play significant roles in the future of tourism. AI-driven chatbots and virtual guides are increasingly being used to personalise digital experiences, offering tailored recommendations and interactive storytelling that enhance visitor engagement (Ivanov & Webster, 2020). Meanwhile, AR allows for the overlay of digital content onto the physical world, enabling tourists to explore historical sites with added layers of information that bring cultural narratives to life (Tussyadiah et al., 2020).

Blockchain technology holds potential for addressing issues of cultural appropriation and ensuring ethical practices in tourism. By creating secure, traceable records of digital content and transactions, blockchain can help verify the authenticity of cultural experiences and ensure that local communities receive fair compensation for their cultural contributions (Walker & Morrison, 2021). These technologies offer new opportunities for innovation in tourism but must be approached with caution to avoid further commodification of culture.

## **IMPACT OF COMMODIFICATION ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

The commodification of culture within the global tourism industry has significant effects on local communities. While tourism can provide economic benefits and cultural exchange opportunities, it often leads to economic inequalities and the exploitation of cultural resources. This section explores the economic dynamics of commodification, highlights the socio-economic impacts of tourism in Bali, Indonesia, and offers policy recommendations aimed at empowering local communities through equitable tourism models.

### **Economic Inequalities: Who Benefits and Who Suffers in Global Tourism?**

The tourism industry is frequently promoted as a means of economic development, particularly in emerging economies. However, the distribution of benefits is often uneven, favouring international corporations, large-scale tourism operators, and global investors over local communities (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). This disparity arises because major tourism profits tend to flow out of the destination to external stakeholders, leaving local businesses and residents with minimal economic gains. The phenomenon, known as “leakage,” reflects how a significant portion of tourism revenue does not stay within the destination economy, undermining the potential benefits for local communities (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019).

Commodification often forces local artisans and cultural practitioners to adapt their traditions to meet tourist expectations, sometimes leading to a loss of authenticity. The focus on creating marketable cultural experiences can result in superficial performances that prioritize economic gain over cultural integrity (Dolezal & Trupp, 2020). This pressure can disempower local communities, turning them into passive providers of cultural experiences rather than active custodians of their heritage.

### **Case Study: Economic and Social Impacts of Tourism in Bali, Indonesia**

Bali, a major global tourism destination, offers a clear example of the dual nature of tourism's impacts on local communities. While tourism in Bali has contributed significantly to the island's economy, generating employment and stimulating infrastructure development, it has also brought about considerable challenges. The rapid growth of tourism in Bali has led to rising property prices, which has made it increasingly difficult for locals to afford land and housing (Cole, 2018). Many local residents have been displaced as traditional villages are replaced by luxury resorts, hotels, and private villas catering to international visitors.

The dominance of international hotel chains and tourism companies in Bali has limited the economic benefits for local businesses. A substantial proportion of the profits generated by tourism flow to foreign-owned enterprises, reducing the economic opportunities for small-scale local operators (Wiranatha et al., 2020). The commodification of Balinese culture, seen in the staged performances of traditional dances and the mass production of handicrafts, raises questions about the sustainability and authenticity of tourism in the region.

The social impacts of tourism in Bali are also significant. The increase in tourism has led to cultural shifts, with local customs and traditions sometimes altered to accommodate the expectations of tourists. The pursuit of tourist dollars can create tensions within communities, particularly when cultural practices are modified or staged for foreign consumption (Dolezal & Trupp, 2020). This case illustrates the complexities of tourism's economic and social impacts, particularly in a context where tourism is a major driver of the local economy.

## **Empowering Local Communities: Policy Recommendations for Equitable Tourism Models**

Addressing the negative impacts of commodification requires a rethinking of tourism models to empower local communities. One approach is to promote community-based tourism (CBT), which emphasises local ownership, participation, and benefit-sharing (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019). CBT initiatives enable local communities to have greater control over tourism development, ensuring that the economic benefits are distributed more equitably. By prioritising local ownership of tourism enterprises, CBT can reduce the economic leakage associated with large scale tourism operators.

Another policy recommendation is to implement revenue-sharing mechanisms that channel a portion of tourism income directly to community development projects. Such mechanisms can fund local education, healthcare, and infrastructure, enhancing the long-term resilience of communities affected by tourism (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). Furthermore, governments and tourism authorities should establish clear guidelines and standards to protect cultural integrity, ensuring that cultural performances and artefacts remain authentic and are not exploited solely for commercial purposes.

Supporting local artisans and small-scale producers is also crucial. Providing access to global markets through digital platforms can help local businesses reach a broader audience without relying on intermediaries who may exploit them. Establishing cooperatives for local craftspeople can foster economic solidarity, allowing them to negotiate fair prices and protect the cultural value of their products (Cole, 2018).

## **Data Analysis: Economic Contributions of Local vs. International Operators**

Quantitative analysis is essential for understanding the economic impacts of tourism on local communities. A comparative study of the revenue generated by local versus international operators can reveal the extent of economic leakage and inform policy decisions. Recent research indicates that local businesses, including family-run accommodations, local restaurants, and small-scale tour operators, contribute significantly to the local economy, as their profits are more likely to stay within the destination (Wiranatha et al., 2020). In contrast, international operators often send profits back to their home countries, limiting the economic benefits for the local population.

Data-driven insights can also highlight disparities in wages and working conditions between locally owned enterprises and multinational companies. Studies have shown that local operators are more likely to provide fair wages and adhere to culturally appropriate labour practices, while large international corporations may prioritise profit margins over local welfare (Dolezal & Trupp, 2020). Such analyses can support advocacy for policies that favour local ownership and equitable tourism practices.

## **SUSTAINABILITY AND REGENERATIVE TOURISM**

The commodification of culture in tourism has brought to light the urgent need to shift from traditional sustainability approaches to a more advanced concept of

regenerative tourism. This section delves into the transformative idea of regenerative tourism, explores the case of New Zealand's Tiaki Promise as a model, discusses the creation of regenerative models in diverse regions, and provides a comparative analysis of sustainability versus regeneration in tourism practices.

### **Moving Beyond Sustainability: The Concept of Regenerative Tourism**

Sustainability in tourism has long focused on minimising the negative impacts of tourism activities, promoting responsible consumption, and preserving natural and cultural resources. However, the concept of regenerative tourism goes a step further. Regenerative tourism aims not only to reduce harm but also to enhance and revitalise local ecosystems and communities. It involves a holistic approach that seeks to leave destinations better than they were before tourism intervention, fostering a balance between environmental health, cultural integrity, and economic stability (Bellato & Wisker, 2022).

Regenerative tourism aligns closely with indigenous perspectives that emphasize interconnectedness and the responsibility of tourists and operators to act as stewards of the land. This model demands a long-term commitment to place, involving local communities in decision making processes and ensuring that tourism initiatives contribute to social and ecological well being. Such an approach can combat the commodification that often undermines local cultures and ecosystems, prioritising restoration and renewal over exploitation (Ateljevic, 2020).

### **Case Study: New Zealand's Tiaki Promise – A Model for Regenerative Tourism**

New Zealand's Tiaki Promise represents a pioneering example of regenerative tourism. Launched in 2018, the Tiaki Promise is a nationwide initiative that encourages both visitors and locals to take responsibility for protecting and preserving the country's unique environment and cultural heritage. The initiative is built on principles that align with the Māori concept of "kaitiakitanga," which translates to guardianship and conservation of natural resources (Carr, 2021).

Through this campaign, visitors are encouraged to travel mindfully, respect local communities, and support sustainable tourism practices that contribute to the ecological and cultural well-being of New Zealand. The Tiaki Promise not only focuses on reducing environmental impacts but also on enhancing the visitor experience by fostering a deeper connection to place and culture. It demonstrates that tourism can be a force for good, provided that both tourists and industry stakeholders adopt a shared sense of responsibility (Carr & Slevitch, 2023).

The Tiaki Promise has successfully engaged local communities, tourism operators, and government agencies in creating policies and practices that align with regenerative principles. It has been instrumental in promoting eco-friendly accommodations, supporting local artisans, and preserving traditional practices that would otherwise be at risk of commodification.

### **Creating and Implementing Regenerative Models in Diverse Regions**

The implementation of regenerative tourism models varies depending on the unique socio economic and cultural context of each destination. However, several core

principles can guide the creation of effective regenerative tourism frameworks. Firstly, engaging local communities in tourism planning and management is crucial. This ensures that tourism development aligns with local values and priorities, enhancing cultural preservation and economic resilience (Higgins Desbiolles, 2020).

Secondly, integrating tourism with conservation efforts is essential. In many cases, regenerative tourism initiatives involve direct contributions to conservation projects, such as habitat restoration, biodiversity protection, and the sustainable use of natural resources. Fostering partnerships between local businesses, government agencies, and international stakeholders can facilitate the development of innovative tourism products that benefit both visitors and residents (Bellato & Wisker, 2022).

Education plays a key role in promoting regenerative tourism. Raising awareness among tourists about the importance of cultural respect and environmental stewardship can contribute to long-term sustainability. Destinations can benefit from educational programmes that highlight local heritage, traditional practices, and ecological conservation, thereby transforming tourists from passive consumers to active participants in regenerative efforts (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

### **Comparative Analysis: Sustainability vs. Regeneration in Tourism Practices**

While sustainability and regeneration share similar goals, there are key distinctions between the two approaches. Sustainability focuses on maintaining the current state of a destination by mitigating the negative impacts of tourism, such as reducing carbon emissions, conserving resources, and implementing waste management systems. Regenerative tourism, on the other hand, aims to leave a positive legacy by actively restoring and improving the ecological, cultural, and economic conditions of a destination (Ateljevic, 2020).

In practice, sustainability often relies on a “do no harm” mindset, which can limit its effectiveness in addressing deeper systemic issues related to tourism's impact. Regeneration, however, embraces a “do better” philosophy that seeks transformative change, challenging the structures that contribute to cultural and environmental degradation (Carr & Slevitch, 2023). For example, regenerative tourism advocates for the revitalisation of cultural landscapes through the promotion of indigenous knowledge and practices, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and its intrinsic value beyond commodification.

Comparative case studies demonstrate that regenerative models often yield more substantial long-term benefits for local communities and ecosystems. In Costa Rica, for instance, the shift from mass tourism to ecotourism has revitalised degraded forests and increased local biodiversity, showcasing how regeneration can result in tangible environmental and socio-economic gains (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). By contrast, traditional sustainability measures may only slow the rate of degradation without addressing the underlying causes.

### **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN COMMODIFYING CULTURE**

Social media has revolutionised the tourism industry by shaping perceptions of destinations, facilitating the aesthetic consumption of culture, and driving trends in travel. However, this digital influence often leads to the commodification of cultural

experiences, where local traditions and landscapes become tools for attracting online attention rather than maintaining authenticity. This section explores the implications of social media in commodifying culture, using the case study of Santorini, Greece, as an example, and offers solutions for fostering authentic cultural engagement through digital platforms. Quantitative data will provide insights into how social media shapes tourist behaviour.

### **The Aesthetic Consumption of Culture: Social Media's Influence on Tourism**

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become powerful forces in tourism marketing, where visual aesthetics play a central role in influencing tourist destinations. This phenomenon, often referred to as "Instagrammability," encourages travellers to seek visually appealing experiences, frequently reducing culture to a curated image. The pursuit of aesthetically pleasing content has led to the rise of "destination marketing" that promotes specific cultural elements, often at the expense of their deeper meaning and context (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020).

The aesthetic consumption of culture via social media can dilute the authenticity of local traditions, as tourism businesses adapt cultural practices to meet the expectations of global audiences. This shift results in the standardisation of experiences, where local uniqueness is compromised to fit global trends. Studies show that the desire for "picture-perfect" moments can lead to the commercialisation of sacred spaces, traditional rituals, and local attire, ultimately commodifying these elements for online consumption (Mariani et al., 2022).

### **Case Study: Santorini's Transformation Under the Pressure of Instagram Influencers**

Santorini, a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea, exemplifies the impact of social media on cultural commodification. The island has gained international fame, particularly due to its white washed buildings, blue-domed churches, and stunning sunsets—features that have become synonymous with "Instagram-worthy" destinations. The influx of influencers and tourists seeking to replicate these iconic images has significantly transformed Santorini's local culture and economy (Gössling, 2021).

As a result, traditional aspects of Santorini's identity have been overshadowed by the prioritisation of visuals that cater to a global audience. Local businesses have increasingly adapted their offerings to meet the expectations of tourists, resulting in the loss of traditional Greek elements that do not fit the digital narrative. The pressure to accommodate tourists has also led to the construction of infrastructure that prioritises aesthetics over cultural preservation, impacting the island's cultural landscape and environment. This case study highlights how social media can intensify the commodification of culture, shifting the focus from authenticity to consumption (Gössling & Leung, 2021).

## **Solutions for Authentic Cultural Engagement via Digital Platforms**

While social media can contribute to the commodification of culture, it also offers opportunities for promoting authentic cultural engagement. To counteract the negative effects of social media, several strategies can be implemented to ensure that cultural heritage is respected and valued within the digital realm:

1. **Promoting Local Narratives:** Encouraging local communities to share their own stories and experiences through social media platforms can provide a more authentic representation of cultural practices. This approach empowers locals to reclaim their narratives, shifting the focus from external interpretations to indigenous voices (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020).
2. **Collaboration with Influencers:** Partnering with influencers who are committed to sustainable and ethical tourism can help foster a more responsible portrayal of destinations. By working with influencers who prioritise cultural respect, destinations can promote a deeper understanding of their traditions while attracting mindful tourists (Mariani et al., 2022).
3. **Digital Education Campaigns:** Raising awareness among tourists about the importance of cultural sensitivity through digital campaigns can contribute to a more respectful tourism experience. Social media platforms can be used to educate potential visitors on the historical and cultural significance of local practices, encouraging them to engage meaningfully rather than superficially.
4. **Regulating Digital Content:** Local governments and tourism boards can implement guidelines for social media use, encouraging tourists to avoid harmful or disrespectful behaviour. For instance, restrictions on photography in sacred or sensitive areas can help preserve the cultural integrity of a destination

## **Quantitative Data on Social Media's Role in Shaping Tourist Behaviour**

Quantitative studies have highlighted the profound influence of social media on travel decisions. Surveys conducted by tourism researchers indicate that over 70% of millennial travellers are motivated to visit a destination based on its online presence, with Instagram playing a pivotal role in shaping travel choices (Mariani et al., 2022). This data underscores the power of visual culture in guiding tourist behaviour and underscores the need for responsible digital engagement.

Data from platforms like Instagram reveal that posts tagged with popular travel-related hashtags, such as *wanderlust* or *instatravel*, often receive higher engagement than posts that emphasise deeper cultural or historical contexts (Gössling, 2021). This trend suggests a preference for aesthetically pleasing imagery, which contributes to the superficial consumption of culture.

Analysis of social media engagement patterns shows that destinations with strong visual appeal tend to experience increased tourist influx, leading to potential overtourism and environmental strain. The study of Santorini's Instagram activity revealed a direct correlation between the number of influencer visits and a spike in tourist arrivals, demonstrating the tangible impact of digital platforms on local

economies and cultures (Gössling & Leung, 2021).

## **CULTURAL RIGHTS AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY IN TOURISM**

In the context of global tourism, the protection of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions is crucial for safeguarding the integrity and authenticity of local cultures. As tourism increasingly commodifies culture, it raises ethical concerns about the appropriation and misrepresentation of cultural heritage. This section examines the challenges of protecting traditional knowledge in a globalised market, highlighting a case study from Australia, and provides legal and ethical guidelines for the tourism sector. Policy recommendations are offered to ensure that the rights of indigenous communities are respected.

### **Protecting Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions in a Globalized Market**

The commodification of culture within tourism often involves the use and reinterpretation of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. This practice can range from the display of traditional dances to the sale of indigenous crafts, frequently leading to the exploitation and misrepresentation of cultural elements (Smith et al., 2019). In a globalised market, the replication of traditional artefacts and rituals for tourism purposes poses a risk to the authenticity and sustainability of local cultures.

Efforts to protect traditional knowledge are complicated by the nature of intellectual property rights (IPR), which are often designed to safeguard individual inventions rather than collective cultural heritage. Traditional knowledge, in many cases, is transmitted orally and embedded in community practices, making it difficult to apply conventional IPR frameworks. Scholars argue that alternative legal mechanisms, such as *sui generis* systems, are needed to address the unique characteristics of traditional knowledge (Drahos & Frankel, 2018).

Furthermore, cultural expressions are not static; they evolve over time and are closely tied to local identity. The commercialisation of these expressions without proper consent or benefit sharing can lead to cultural erosion and economic inequalities. Thus, it is essential to recognise the collective ownership of traditional knowledge and involve indigenous communities in decision making processes regarding its use (Harrison et al., 2020).

### **Case Study: The Fight for Intellectual Property Rights Among Aboriginal Artists in Australia**

In Australia, the misuse of Aboriginal art and symbols has sparked significant debate over the need to protect indigenous cultural expressions. The mass production of Aboriginal designs, often without permission, has led to financial and cultural losses for indigenous artists. These issues highlight the challenges of safeguarding traditional knowledge in the face of global tourism and commercial interests (McGrath & Janke, 2021).

Aboriginal artists have taken legal action against companies that exploit their cultural expressions, leading to landmark cases that underscore the need for robust intellectual property protections. One notable case involved the use of Aboriginal

designs on mass-produced merchandise without consent, which resulted in a public apology and compensation to the affected communities (Janke, 2020). These cases have prompted discussions on how to balance cultural preservation with tourism development.

Despite some successes, challenges remain in ensuring that Aboriginal artists have control over their cultural heritage. The lack of comprehensive legal frameworks that recognise collective ownership has left indigenous communities vulnerable to exploitation. Advocates call for the implementation of laws that go beyond copyright and trademark protections, embracing a more holistic understanding of cultural rights (McGrath & Janke, 2021).

### **Legal and Ethical Guidelines for Respecting Cultural Heritage in Tourism**

To address the ethical dilemmas surrounding cultural commodification, the tourism industry must adopt legal and ethical guidelines that respect cultural heritage. Key guidelines include:

1. **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC):** Tourism operators should obtain the explicit consent of indigenous communities before using their cultural expressions for commercial purposes. FPIC ensures that local stakeholders have a voice in how their cultural assets are represented and utilised (Smith et al., 2019).
2. **Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms:** Profits generated from the use of traditional knowledge should be equitably shared with indigenous communities. This can include direct payments, investment in community development, or support for cultural preservation initiatives (Harrison et al., 2020).
3. **Respect for Sacred and Sensitive Sites:** Some cultural expressions and sites hold deep spiritual significance and should not be commercialised. Tourism operators must respect cultural sensitivities and establish clear guidelines for the appropriate use of such sites (McGrath & Janke, 2021).
4. **Education and Awareness:** Tourism practitioners should educate tourists about the cultural significance of local traditions and the importance of respecting intellectual property rights. Educational campaigns can reduce unintentional appropriation and promote more responsible tourism behaviour.

### **Policy Recommendations: Intellectual Property Rights for Indigenous Communities**

To safeguard cultural heritage in the context of tourism, policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

1. **Develop Sui Generis Systems:** Legal frameworks specifically designed for traditional knowledge can provide better protection than conventional IPR. These systems should recognise the collective nature of traditional knowledge and ensure that indigenous communities maintain control over their cultural expressions (Drahos & Frankel, 2018).
2. **Strengthen National and International Legislation:** Countries should reinforce their intellectual property laws to include protections for

traditional knowledge. International bodies, such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), can play a role in facilitating cross-border agreements that protect indigenous heritage (Harrison et al., 2020).

3. Create Cultural Registers: Establishing cultural registers, where traditional knowledge is documented and protected, can help prevent unauthorised use. These registers should be managed by indigenous communities themselves, ensuring that they retain control over their cultural assets (Smith et al., 2019).
4. Promote Indigenous-Led Tourism: Supporting indigenous-led tourism ventures can empower local communities and provide an authentic cultural experience for tourists. By giving indigenous people the opportunity to manage tourism activities, the sector can move towards a more ethical and sustainable model (Janke, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

### Summary of Key Findings: Cultural Commodification in a Global Context

The commodification of culture in the global tourism industry remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by various factors including mass tourism, digital transformation, and shifts in societal values. This article has explored how these dynamics impact authenticity, sustainability, and ethical considerations within tourism. Key findings suggest that while cultural commodification can lead to economic benefits, it often risks eroding the very traditions and identities it seeks to promote. This tension is evident in the dilution of cultural practices, the challenges of overtourism, and the ethical dilemmas of cultural appropriation. Comparative analyses across diverse regions highlight both shared challenges and unique manifestations of commodification, underscoring the need for a nuanced, context-specific approach to tourism development (Smith et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2020).

### Future Trends: Anticipating the Next Disruptions in Tourism

As the tourism industry evolves, several trends are anticipated to further disrupt traditional practices and impact cultural commodification. The growing influence of digital platforms, from virtual reality to social media, will continue to shape how cultures are perceived and consumed. AI, AR, and blockchain technologies are poised to redefine the tourism experience, influencing everything from heritage site management to the authenticity of cultural narratives (Della Lucia & Trunfio, 2018). The rise of regenerative tourism, which emphasises restoration and renewal rather than mere sustainability, is likely to gain traction, driven by increasing awareness of environmental and cultural preservation. There is a shift towards indigenous-led tourism models that seek to empower local communities and give them greater control over how their heritage is shared with the world (McGrath & Janke, 2021).

The next decade may also witness a heightened focus on ethical marketing practices and a broader recognition of the importance of intellectual property rights for indigenous cultures. These developments will necessitate a balance between embracing technological innovation and safeguarding cultural integrity, requiring

collaboration between governments, local communities, industry stakeholders, and academic institutions (Harrison et al., 2020).

### **Practical Implications for Policy, Industry, and Local Communities**

The findings of this article have practical implications for policymakers, the tourism industry, and local communities. From a policy perspective, there is a clear need for frameworks that prioritise cultural rights and sustainability. Governments should enforce stricter regulations to prevent the exploitation of cultural assets and ensure that tourism benefits are equitably shared. Implementing cultural protection laws and incentivising sustainable tourism practices are crucial steps in this direction (Janke, 2020).

For the tourism industry, ethical considerations should be central to marketing strategies. Ethical guidelines for tourism operators should include respecting local customs, ensuring fair compensation for cultural contributions, and promoting transparency in how cultural narratives are presented. Companies should engage in meaningful dialogues with local communities to understand their perspectives and preferences, fostering an environment where tourism acts as a bridge for cultural understanding rather than a source of exploitation (Smith et al., 2019).

Local communities play a vital role in shaping the future of tourism. Empowering these communities through education, skill development, and access to decision-making processes is essential for sustainable tourism. Indigenous and local leaders should be given the resources and authority to guide how their cultural heritage is shared with tourists. Community-led initiatives, such as cultural festivals and heritage tours, can provide an authentic experience while ensuring that the benefits of tourism are felt locally (Harrison et al., 2020).

### **A Call for Sustainable, Ethical, and Culturally Respectful Tourism Practices**

The way forward in global tourism requires a paradigm shift towards practices that are not only sustainable but regenerative and respectful of cultural diversity. This calls for an industry-wide commitment to cultural sensitivity, ethical engagement, and equitable partnerships with local communities. By embracing regenerative tourism, stakeholders can go beyond mere conservation and work towards restoring cultural landscapes that have been impacted by commodification (Della Lucia & Trunfio, 2018).

Tourism practitioners are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach that considers the socio cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of tourism development. This involves moving away from extractive tourism models and towards those that celebrate and preserve local identities. Ethical marketing, protection of intellectual property rights, and genuine engagement with local stakeholders should be the cornerstones of tourism policies and practices in the 21st century.

While the challenges posed by cultural commodification are significant, they also present an opportunity to reimagine the future of tourism. By prioritising ethical practices, acknowledging the rights of indigenous and local communities, and embracing innovative yet culturally sensitive solutions, the tourism sector can

contribute to a more equitable and sustainable global economy. The future of tourism lies in fostering connections that honour diversity, authenticity, and the shared heritage of humanity.

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