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Tourism-led Rural Commodification: An Impact Assessment

Comodificación Rural Impulsada por el Turismo: Una Evaluación de Impacto

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Abstract

This study provides a systematic literature review of tourism-led rural commodification to assess its impacts on rural communities and landscapes critically. Following the PRISMA guidelines, 64 journal articles indexed in Scopus were analysed to synthesise patterns, tensions, and regional variations in the impacts of the commodification of rurality. The findings reveal that while commodification can generate income, employment, infrastructure development, and cultural revitalisation, it also frequently produces social inequality, cultural distortion, environmental degradation, and processes of rural gentrification that marginalise local residents. The review highlights marked differences in impacts across geographic contexts, particularly between developed and developing regions, underscoring the importance of place-specific governance and policy responses. This study advances a nuanced understanding of tourism-led rural transformation and identifies key conditions under which commodification supports or undermines sustainable rural development. The findings offer critical insights for policymakers, planners, and scholars

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seeking to balance economic growth with social equity, cultural integrity, and environmental sustainability in rural tourism contexts.

Keywords: environmental impact; future research; rural tourism; rural gentrification; social impact.

Resumen

Este estudio presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre la comodificación rural impulsada por el turismo con el fin de evaluar críticamente sus impactos en las comunidades y paisajes rurales. Siguiendo las directrices PRISMA, se analizaron 64 artículos de revistas indexadas en Scopus para sintetizar patrones, tensiones y variaciones regionales en los impactos de la comodificación de la ruralidad. Los hallazgos revelan que, si bien la comodificación puede generar ingresos, empleo, desarrollo de infraestructura y revitalización cultural, también produce con frecuencia desigualdad social, distorsión cultural, degradación ambiental y procesos de gentrificación rural que marginan a los residentes locales. La revisión destaca diferencias marcadas en los impactos entre distintos contextos geográficos, particularmente entre regiones desarrolladas y en desarrollo, lo que subraya la importancia de formas de gobernanza y respuestas políticas específicas al contexto local. Este estudio contribuye a una comprensión más matizada de la transformación rural impulsada por el turismo e identifica condiciones clave bajo las cuales la comodificación apoya o socava el desarrollo rural sostenible. Los resultados ofrecen aportes críticos para responsables de políticas públicas, planificadores y académicos que buscan equilibrar el crecimiento económico con la equidad social, la integridad cultural y la sostenibilidad ambiental en contextos de turismo rural.

Palabras clave: Impacto ambiental; investigación futura; turismo rural; gentrificación rural; impacto social.

1. Introduction

Rural tourism has emerged globally as a prominent strategy for rural development, driven by growing tourist demand for authentic, place-based, and immersive experiences beyond urban environments. Advances in transportation, digital connectivity, and destination marketing have further enhanced the accessibility and visibility of rural areas, positioning them as desirable sites for leisure, cultural exchange, and lifestyle consumption. Governments, development agencies, and private actors increasingly promote rural tourism as a mechanism to diversify rural economies, counter rural-urban migration, and preserve cultural landscapes and traditional livelihoods (Hall et al., 2003; Lane, 2009; Richards & Hall, 2003). Consequently, substantial investments have been directed toward rural tourism initiatives worldwide, often framed within narratives of sustainability, community development, and heritage conservation.

However, the expansion of rural tourism is closely intertwined with the commodification of rurality, whereby rural landscapes, cultural practices, social relations, and ways of life are transformed into marketable products for tourist consumption. Rural life becomes commodified when cultural practices that evolve through everyday social reproduction are consciously packaged, represented, and exchanged within tourism markets (Crouch, 2006). This process is evident in the construction of rural "tourist attractions," the staging of cultural performances, and the reconfiguration of agricultural, environmental, and heritage resources to meet visitor expectations (Crouch, 2006; George et al., 2009). As multifunctional rural spaces increasingly incorporate tourism and leisure activities (Gray, 1999), natural and cultural elements acquire new meanings shaped by commercial imperatives, often privileging exchange value over use value (Cloke, 2007).

Tourism-led rural commodification manifests in multiple forms, including cultural, environmental, agricultural, heritage, event-based, recreational, and wellness commodification. While these processes are frequently promoted as engines of local economic growth, they also introduce complex social, cultural, economic, and environmental consequences for rural communities. On the one hand, tourism investment can generate income, create employment opportunities, revitalise cultural heritage, and foster community pride and participation (Bosman & Dredge, 2011). On the other hand, commodification may contribute to cultural distortion, environmental degradation, social inequality, and the displacement or marginalisation of long-term residents (Ghoddousi et al., 2018; Mitchell & De Waal, 2009). As such, tourism affects both the tangible and intangible dimensions of rural life, reshaping everyday practices, social relations, and place meanings.

The impacts of tourism-led rural commodification are neither uniform nor universally experienced. Emerging research highlights significant contextual and regional variations, shaped by governance structures, land tenure systems, socio-economic conditions, and the role of state and market actors. In some contexts, commodification is negotiated and embedded within regulatory frameworks, whereas in others it is characterised by power asymmetries, external control, and uneven distribution of benefits. These dynamics are increasingly linked to processes of tourism gentrification, whereby rising property values, changing land uses, and socio-cultural restructuring alter rural settlement patterns and community composition (Sun et al., 2019). Such transformations underscore the need to move beyond simplified assessments of tourism as either beneficial or harmful, towards a more nuanced understanding of how commodification operates across different rural settings.

Despite a growing body of literature examining tourism-led rural commodification, existing studies remain fragmented across disciplines, regions, and thematic concerns. Many focus on specific case studies or on single dimensions of impact, thereby limiting comparative insight into broader patterns, contradictions, and trade-offs. There is therefore a need for a systematic and integrative assessment that synthesises

existing evidence to clarify how tourism-led commodification reshapes rural communities and environments across socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions. In response to this gap, the present study undertakes a systematic literature review on tourism-led rural commodification. By synthesising findings from diverse geographic contexts, this study aims to examine the multifaceted impacts of commodification on rural areas critically and to identify recurring patterns, regional differences, and underlying mechanisms. In doing so, the study contributes to theoretical debates on commodification, rural transformation, and tourism gentrification, while offering evidence-based insights to inform policy-making and the design of more equitable and sustainable rural tourism strategies.

2. Tourism-led rural commodification, commercialisation, and gentrification

Commodification has pervaded all aspects of contemporary society. In a society where goods are treated as commodities, commodification prioritises exchange value over use value (Perkins, 2006). According to Marxist political economy, objects become commodities when they acquire exchange value beyond their use value and can be traded, thereby entering the quantitative domain. Commodification produces products and services for exchange, monetized under market conditions. The quest for profit drives the sale of goods and services. As commodification progresses, additional locations enter the commercial sphere and acquire new significance (Perkins, 2006). Government officials have generated revenue and altered a region's cultural landscape by selling naming rights to stadiums, metro stations, and other public facilities to corporate sponsors. Commodification significantly shapes places by combining global and local influences in urban or rural settings. Commodification transforms objects or practices into commodities for profit based on market value (Cohen, 1988). The utility of a commodity is obscured by its exchange value, and a standardised social standing substitutes for its distinctiveness (Shepherd, 2002). The economic concept of commodification was applied to discussions of tourism, initially in cultural tourism (Cohen, 1988), then in rural culture and lifestyles (Perkins, 2006), and later in hospitality (Cole, 2007).

Rural transformation driven by tourism involves a complex interaction of commodification, commercialisation, and gentrification. Rural characteristics are initially transformed into commodities, shifting from inherent aspects of local culture to marketed goods designed for tourist use (Shepherd, 2002). This strategy prepares for commercialisation by presenting rural landscapes and cultural practices as tourist attractions, leading to increased visitor activity and investment in the region (Bao & Su, 2004). Increased tourism and investment can lead to gentrification (Guimond & Simard, 2010), causing property values to rise, changes in community demographics, and socio-economic upheavals that may displace long-term residents (Joo, 2012). This process emphasises the interconnectedness among tourism development, rural identity, and community sustainability, and underscores the importance of strategic planning and inclusive approaches to harmonise economic advancement with social and cultural conservation in rural regions. When a rural space or component is commodified and incorporated into

the circulation of capital, it will alter settlement patterns, social structures, spatial representations, and relationships among various stakeholders.

Bao and Su (2004) characterise tourism commercialisation as a transformative phenomenon occurring within tourism destinations, marked by a notable increase in businesses catering to tourists and the prevalence of homogeneous products. This proliferation of tourist-oriented enterprises often results in the reduction of ethnic handicrafts and the mass production of shoddy artefacts, leading to a flood of commoditised goods in the market. Sun et al. (2019) further elucidate tourism commercialisation as the outcome of economic capital displacing unique local cultures, in which traditional practices and artefacts are transformed to meet tourism demand. Notably, the core of tourism commercialisation lies in commodifying local cultural products and services, resulting in a proliferation of mass-clustered tourism offerings. While commodification erodes the significance of cultural symbols and rituals, tourism commercialisation extends beyond cultural commodification to encompass the homogenisation and large-scale production of service products within tourist destinations.

The transformation of rural areas driven by tourism has profound implications for local inhabitants. While tourism is often heralded as a mechanism for sustainable development and revitalising rural settlements facing demographic challenges (Chang et al., 2018), its impact can also yield undesired consequences. Rural gentrification, characterised by the influx of middle-class or affluent 'gentrifiers' and the displacement of residents, is increasingly reshaping contemporary rural landscapes worldwide (Guimond & Simard, 2010). The term 'gentrification' involves the investment of 'productive capital,' as delineated by Smith (1979). Smith further emphasises the pivotal role of 'gentrifiers' in transforming and consuming the built environment (Smith, 1992).

3. Research methodology

This study examines the impacts of tourism-led rural commodification on rural communities and environments across social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions. Given the contextual diversity of rural tourism development and the varied ways in which commodification unfolds across regions, governance systems, and stages of development, a systematic literature review (SLR) approach was adopted (Paul & Barari, 2022). An SLR is particularly well suited to synthesising fragmented empirical evidence, identifying recurring patterns and contradictions, and generating critical insights that cannot be adequately captured by single or limited case studies (Lim et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2020).

The review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), which provide a transparent and replicable framework for identifying, screening, assessing eligibility, and selecting relevant studies. Adopting the PRISMA protocol enhances methodological rigour by systematically documenting each stage of the review

process, thereby reducing selection bias and improving the credibility and reproducibility of the review. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram summarising the selection process.

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, which is widely recognized for its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in tourism studies, geography, rural studies, and the social sciences. The search was conducted on 22 December 2023, using the title, abstract, and keyword fields. A structured search string combining Boolean operators and truncation symbols was employed to capture variations of key concepts related to commodification and rural tourism: (" Commodi" OR "Commercial*" OR "Gentrification" OR "Marketization*" OR "Marketisation" OR "Monet*") AND "Tourism" AND ("Rural" OR "Countryside" OR "Rustic" OR "Remote" OR "Village") *. This strategy was designed to capture the multiple expressions of tourism-led commodification while maintaining a clear focus on rural contexts.

The initial search identified 947 records from the Scopus database. These records underwent an initial screening using database-level filters to ensure relevance and quality. First, records were limited to relevant subject areas–social sciences, environmental sciences, business, management and accounting, arts and humanities, and multidisciplinary fields–resulting in the exclusion of 143 records. Second, the language was restricted to English, leading to the removal of 77 records. Third, the source type was limited to peer-reviewed journals, excluding 4 records, and finally, the document type was restricted to research articles, resulting in the exclusion of 199 records. After applying these filters, 524 records remained for further screening.

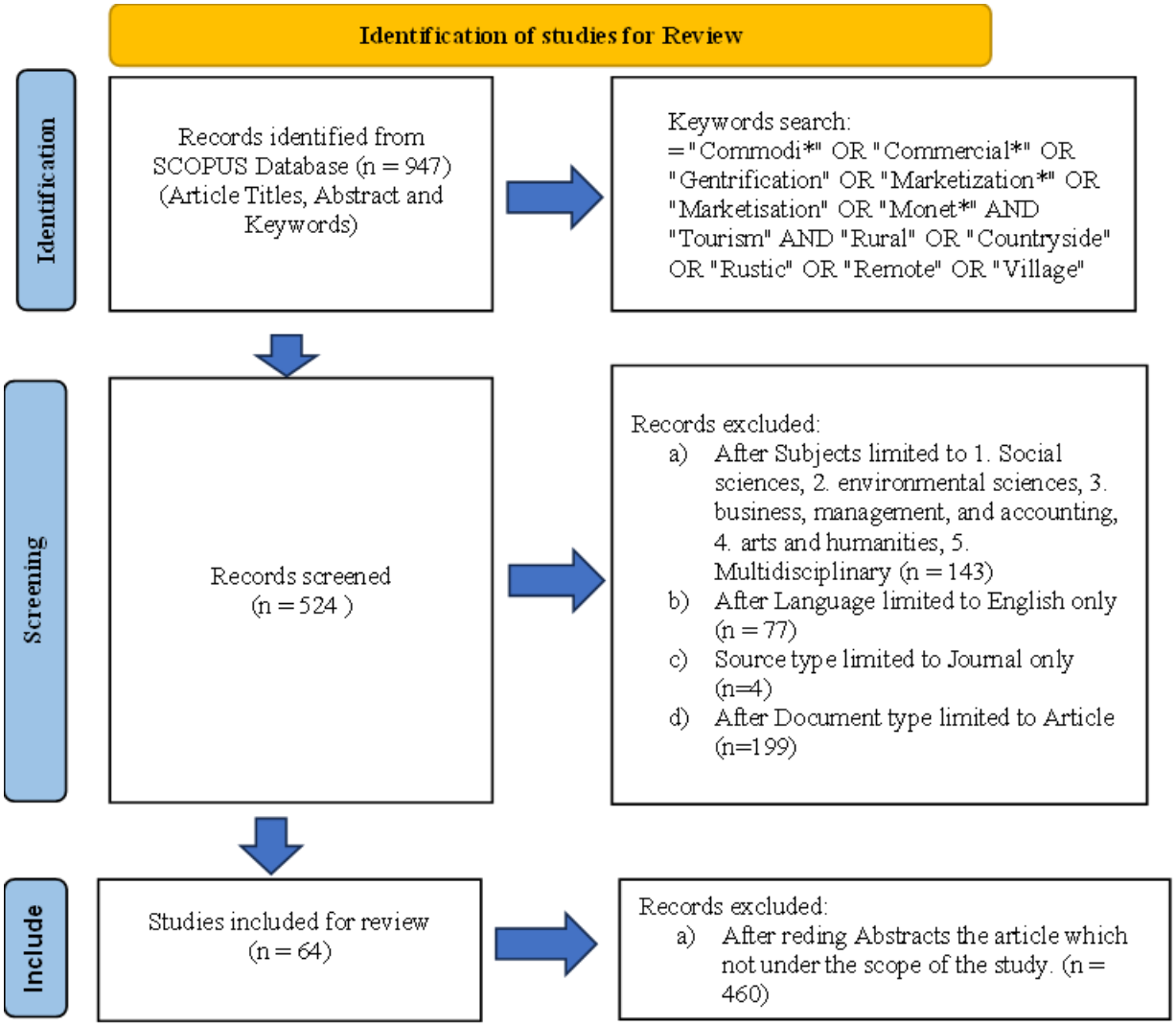
The remaining records underwent title and abstract screening to assess their relevance to tourism-led rural commodification. At this stage, 460 records were excluded because they did not explicitly address the impacts of commodification, commercialisation, or gentrification in rural tourism contexts. The full texts of the remaining articles were then carefully reviewed to ensure alignment with the study's analytical focus on the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism-led rural commodification.

Following this multi-stage screening and eligibility assessment, a final corpus of 64 articles was retained for systematic analysis. While this number is smaller than that reported in large-scale bibliometric or mapping reviews, it reflects the study's conceptual specificity and analytical focus rather than a limitation of the search process. Focused systematic reviews that prioritise thematic depth and critical synthesis commonly rely on similarly sized datasets (Lim et al., 2022; Paul & Barari, 2022).

Data were systematically extracted from each included article, including study location, methodological approach, and reported impacts of tourism-led commodification. A thematic synthesis was then conducted, organising findings into social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions, while also

identifying cross-cutting themes such as inequality, displacement, authenticity, governance, and power relations. This approach enabled a critical, comparative analysis of recurring patterns and regional variations, supporting a nuanced understanding of how tourism-led rural commodification shapes rural transformation across diverse global contexts.

Figure 1: Flow chart of selecting articles using the PRISMA framework, modified from (Moher et al., 2009)



Source: Authors

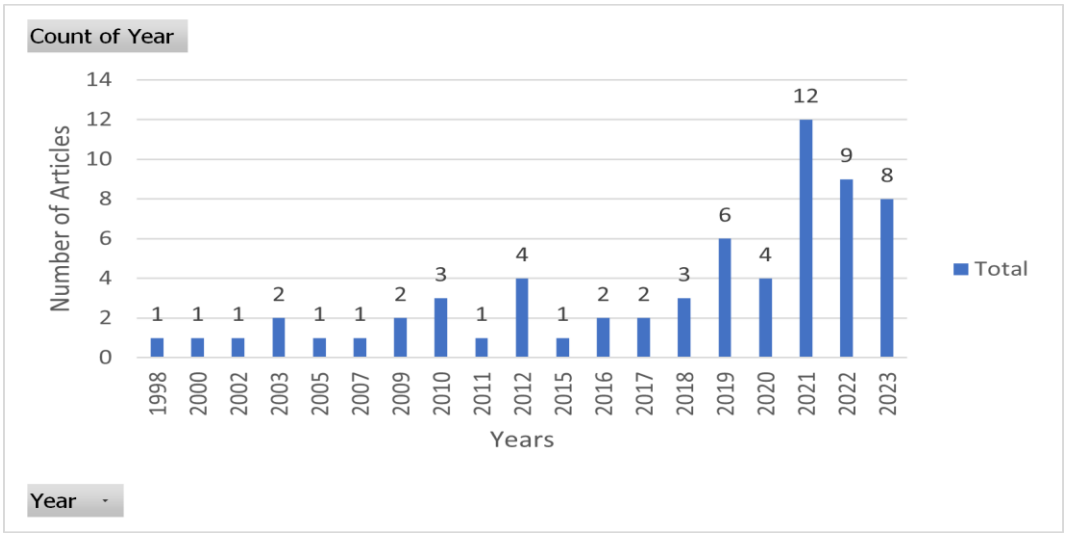
4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Year-wise publications

The temporal distribution of studies indicates a gradual but significant evolution of research on tourism-led rural commodification over the past twenty-five years (Figure 2). Early contributions were limited and

sporadic between 1998 and 2005, reflecting an exploratory phase in which commodification was discussed within broader debates on rural tourism. Scholarly attention increased modestly between 2006 and 2010, resulting in 10 publications and signalling growing recognition of commodification as an important analytical lens. From 2011 to 2017, research output expanded steadily, with 14 publications focusing more explicitly on rural transformation, cultural identity, and community impacts. The year 2019 marked a notable peak, with 6 publications, indicating heightened academic interest prior to the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A substantial increase is evident from 2020 to 2023, with 33 of the 64 reviewed articles. This recent surge reflects a sustained and deepening engagement with the social, cultural, economic, and environmental consequences of tourism-led rural commodification. Overall, the trend demonstrates a shift from isolated case-based discussions toward more holistic and critical examinations of the commodification processes of rural tourism.

Figure 2: Showing the year-wise publications



Source: Authors

4.2 Location of the studies

The geographic distribution of the reviewed studies reveals a clear regional imbalance, with a strong concentration of research in Asia, particularly in China, followed by Europe and selected parts of Africa. East Asia, especially China, dominates the literature, reflecting sustained academic and policy interest in rural revitalisation, heritage-led tourism, and tourism-induced gentrification. Chinese case studies extensively examine rural restructuring, state-led commodification, ethnic tourism, and socio-spatial displacement, offering detailed insights into the mechanisms through which tourism transforms rural places. Japan and South Korea similarly contribute studies focused on sociocultural change, overtourism, and community responses to tourism development.

European research is comparatively more dispersed and tends to emphasise heritage conservation, lifestyle entrepreneurship, and negotiated forms of commodification. Studies from Portugal, Ireland, Denmark, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey commonly address issues of cultural representation, rural livelihoods, and sustainability, often within stronger regulatory and governance frameworks. African studies, concentrated mainly in Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa, and Uganda, foreground ethical concerns, land rights, conservation conflicts, and uneven development, highlighting power asymmetries between local communities, state actors, and external tourism interests.

Research from North America focuses primarily on symbolic commodification, community perceptions, and social cohesion, with limited emphasis on physical displacement. In contrast, South America and parts of Southeast Asia are underrepresented, with existing studies from Chile, Ecuador, Belize, Mexico, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines pointing to tourism-induced socio-economic change, cultural commodification, and environmental pressures. Overall, the uneven regional distribution underscores the need for greater comparative research, particularly in Latin America and other underrepresented regions, to better understand how tourism-led rural commodification operates across diverse socio-political contexts (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Location of the studies on impact assessment of tourism-led rural commodification (map generated from Google Map)



Source: Authors

4.3 The research approach used by the studies

Studies on tourism impacts across various locations predominantly employ qualitative research methodologies (49 articles), with a significant number of studies using mixed methods (11 articles) and a few utilising quantitative approaches (4 articles) (see Table 1). Qualitative research is prevalent in

exploring socio-cultural dynamics, ethical implications, and community perceptions. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of complex issues such as cultural commodification in Western Ethiopia, socio-ecological impacts in Iran, and heritage conservation in Uganda. Combining qualitative and quantitative data, mixed-method research is used to analyse multifaceted impacts, such as income distribution and economic mobility in Nepal and rural tourism gentrification in China and Turkey. Quantitative research is applied to assess measurable changes and patterns, such as socio-economic and environmental changes over time in South Africa, tourist satisfaction and behaviour in Darjeeling, India, and leisure farms in Taiwan. This blend of methodologies provides a comprehensive understanding of tourism's diverse impacts, ranging from socio-cultural transformations to economic and environmental changes across different regions.

Table 1: Research approach used by the articles

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH	MIXED METHOD APPROACH
(Bate & Taylor, 2019), (Bhattacharya et al., 2023), (Sun et al., 2019) and (Wang et al., 2023)	(Abbink, 2009), (Alcindor et al., 2021), (Alipour et al., 2020), (Baptista, 2011), (Blair et al., 2019), (Bloch, 2017), (Boonzaaier & Wels, 2017), (Cerveny, 2007), (Chen & Kong, 2021), (Chen et al., 2022), (Christou & Sharpley, 2019), (Cipollari, 2010), (Cruickshank, 2021), (Cui et al., 2021), (Ćurčić et al., 2020), (Campli, 2019), (Đunda, 2023), (Gardner, 2012), (George E. W., 2010) (Ghaderia & Béal, 2020), (Hopkins, 1998), (Jang & Park, 2020), (Ji & Heath, 2023), (Joo, 2012), (Kim & Kang, 2020), (Kneafsey, 2000), (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015), (Lak & Khairabadi, 2022), (Laudati, 2010), (Li, 2003), (Lu et al., 2022), (Mahony & Zyl, 2002), (McMoran, 2005), (Medina, 2003), (Negi et al., 2022), (Peng et al., 2018), (Prasad, 2012), (Prince, 2017), (Setiadi & Gharata, 2022), (Sheedy, 2022), (Sherman, 2018), (Shuang, 2012), (Skowron-Markowska & Nowakowska, 2021), (Song & Yuan, 2021), (Soukup et al., 2021), (Toshio, 2009), (Wang & Li, 2021), (Zhang et al., 2022), (Zhao et al., 2022)	(Bennike & Nielsen, 2024), (Gocer et al., 2021), (Husa, 2020), (Kan, 2020), (Li et al., 2016), (Masilela et al., 2023), (Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023), (Ramos et al., 2016), (Sweetman et al., 2019), (Wang et al., 2023) and (Zhu et al., 2021)

Source: author elaboration

4.4 Impact of tourism-led rural commodification

The social impact on the local community

The social impacts of tourism-led rural commodification are highly uneven and context-dependent, shaped by local power relations, governance structures, and stages of tourism development. Across diverse contexts, tourism commodification has been shown to generate social benefits, particularly through livelihood diversification, community visibility, and selective forms of social empowerment. In both developed and developing regions, tourism-related income and employment can contribute to poverty alleviation and improved living standards (Blair et al., 2019; Bloch, 2017; Laudati, 2010; Peng et al., 2018). The influx of visitors and capital often modernises everyday life and infrastructure, enhances

public image, and fosters new forms of community pride and cohesion, especially in destinations where tourism is locally initiated or community-oriented (Li, 2003; Joo, 2012). Tourism development has also been linked to human capital formation through enhanced knowledge, skills, and education (Li et al., 2016), as well as psychological empowerment, with residents reinterpreting their homes and villages as valuable socio-cultural assets (Zhao et al., 2022). Notably, women's participation in tourism enterprises such as homestays, craft production, and service work has facilitated economic independence and increased bargaining power within households, particularly in parts of Asia and the Global South (Bhattacharya et al., 2023; Chen & Kong, 2021; Li, 2003; Sheedy, 2022).

However, the literature consistently demonstrates that these social gains are accompanied by profound social disruptions, particularly when commodification is externally driven or poorly regulated. In many developing and transition contexts, tourism-led commodification has destabilised traditional social structures and ways of life, resulting in the erosion of place attachment, customary roles, and everyday practices (Chen et al., 2022; Cruickshank, 2021; Ćurčić et al., 2020; Gardner, 2012; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Toshio, 2009). Studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America document how tourism expansion frequently intensifies social inequality, as benefits accrue disproportionately to elites, investors, or newcomers, while long-term residents face marginalisation or displacement (Bate & Taylor, 2019; Laudati, 2010; Shuang, 2012; Gocer et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In extreme cases, tourism development has resulted in forced evictions and the restructuring of rural communities around service-oriented labour identities, reducing residents to hosts, employees, or cultural performers within their own villages (Chen et al., 2022; Gardner, 2012; Zhao et al., 2022).

Beyond material inequalities, the commodification of tourism reshapes everyday social relations and moral economies. The objectification of residents, concerns over privacy and photo misuse, and heightened competition among community members undermine social trust and cohesion (Ghaderia & Béal, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2020; McMoran, 2005). The prioritisation of market-oriented skills such as language proficiency, aesthetic sensibilities, and service performance creates new hierarchies of belonging, systematically excluding older residents and those with lower educational or economic capital (Sherman, 2018; Shuang, 2012). In both developed and developing contexts, this has contributed to the fragmentation of previously cohesive communities, with growing divisions along lines of wealth, education, and cultural preference (Ji & Heath, 2023; Sherman, 2018). The erosion of traditional knowledge and neighbourly relations further weakens social capital, reinforcing processes of social disempowerment rather than collective advancement (Li et al., 2016; Medina, 2003; Sherman, 2018).

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that tourism-led rural commodification does not produce uniform social outcomes but instead reconfigures rural societies in deeply uneven ways. While tourism can foster empowerment and social renewal under conditions of inclusive governance and local control,

it more frequently intensifies inequality, exclusion, and identity-based fragmentation when driven by external market logics. These findings challenge overly optimistic narratives of rural tourism as a universally beneficial development strategy and underscore the need for socially sensitive, place-specific governance frameworks that prioritise community agency and social justice.

The cultural impact on the local community

Tourism-led rural commodification exerts complex and often contradictory influences on local cultures, functioning simultaneously as both a mechanism of cultural recognition and a mechanism of cultural restructuring. Across both developed and developing contexts, tourism has contributed to the renewed visibility and valuation of local cultural practices, traditions, and heritage landscapes (Abbink, 2009; Skowron-Markowska & Nowakowska, 2021; Song & Yuan, 2021). By transforming everyday cultural expressions into marketable assets, tourism can stimulate cultural exchange, revitalise neglected traditions, and generate renewed interest in local history and heritage (Alipour et al., 2020; Joo, 2012). In several Asian and European cases, tourism development has encouraged villagers' participation in cultural activities, strengthened cultural education, and fostered a shared sense of identity and pride, particularly where heritage conservation and tourism are strategically aligned (Cui et al., 2021; Cruickshank, 2021; Joo, 2012). Under such conditions, commodification can operate as a tool for cultural continuity rather than cultural loss.

However, the reviewed literature consistently cautions that cultural gains achieved through tourism are fragile and unevenly distributed. In many developing and transitional rural contexts, market-oriented representations of culture frequently privilege externally legible and visually appealing elements, leading to cultural distortion and the selective preservation of heritage (Alipour et al., 2020). Traditional practices, rituals, and built forms are often modified, simplified, or aestheticised to align with tourist expectations, undermining their original meanings and social functions. Studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America highlight processes of cultural appropriation, whereby tourists, investors, or state actors impose external narratives that reshape local identities and redefine what is considered "authentic" culture (Abbink, 2009; Prasad, 2012). This externally driven cultural framing can marginalise local voices and reinforce asymmetrical power relations in cultural production.

A recurring theme across regions is cultural alienation, the growing disconnect between the culture performed for tourists and the lived cultural realities of residents (Cruickshank, 2021). As tourism intensifies, villagers often navigate a dual cultural existence, performing idealised or commodified identities while privately maintaining alternative cultural practices. This staged versus off-staged self becomes particularly pronounced in destinations experiencing rapid tourism growth, where homogenised, tourist-friendly cultural images overshadow the diversity and fluidity of local identities (Li,

2003; Sheedy, 2022). The erosion of vernacular architecture, local languages, and everyday customs further threatens intangible cultural heritage, especially in rural communities with limited regulatory protection or weak cultural governance (Gocer et al., 2021; Medina, 2003). Overall, the literature suggests that tourism-led cultural commodification does not simply preserve or destroy rural culture; rather, it restructures cultural meaning, authority, and ownership. While tourism can revitalise heritage under conditions of community control and reflexive governance, it more often produces selective cultural representations that prioritise market value over cultural integrity. These findings challenge celebratory narratives of tourism as a neutral vehicle for cultural preservation and underscore the need for culturally sensitive governance frameworks that recognise culture as a lived, evolving process rather than a consumable product.

The economic impact on the rural village

Tourism-led rural commodification is frequently promoted as a catalyst for local economic development, and the reviewed literature confirms that tourism can generate substantial financial benefits for rural communities, particularly in the early and intermediate stages of development. Across both developed and developing regions, tourism has contributed to increased household incomes, employment creation, and the emergence of small-scale enterprises such as homestays, craft production, guiding services, and hospitality businesses (Abbink, 2009; Cerveny, 2007; Cipollari, 2010; Cruickshank, 2021; Li et al., 2016; Mahony & Zyl, 2002; Setiadi & Gharata, 2022). In several Asian and European contexts, tourism has also facilitated income diversification, reducing reliance on agriculture and other declining rural livelihoods, thereby enhancing short-term economic resilience (Bennike & Nielsen, 2024; Skowron-Markowska & Nowakowska, 2021). Tourism-related investments often stimulate local entrepreneurship and infrastructure development, particularly where tourism is embedded within broader rural development strategies (Ćurčić et al., 2020; Đunda, 2023; McMoran, 2005; Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023). These economic gains are frequently interpreted by local stakeholders as indicators of progress and modernization (Wang et al., 2023).

However, a more critical reading of the literature reveals that the economic benefits of tourism commodification are uneven, fragile, and highly contingent on governance structures and market positioning. A recurring pattern across regions, especially in developing and peripheral rural areas, is the concentration of economic gains among wealthier households, external investors, or tourism intermediaries, leading to widening income inequalities within communities (Bennike & Nielsen, 2024; Jang & Park, 2020; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). In destinations where land ownership, capital access, or regulatory power is unevenly distributed, tourism-driven development tends to marginalise smallholders and low-income residents, reinforcing existing socio-economic hierarchies rather than alleviating them. Studies from Nepal, China, South Africa, and Southeast Asia demonstrate that wage

employment in tourism is often seasonal, low-paid, and insecure, limiting its potential for long-term economic mobility (Baptista, 2011; Bate & Taylor, 2019; Mahony & Zyl, 2002).

Dependency on tourism emerges as a critical economic risk, particularly in regions where alternative livelihoods are weakened or displaced. Several studies highlight that overreliance on tourism exposes rural communities to external shocks, such as economic downturns, policy shifts, and global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Kong, 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). This vulnerability contributes to economic precarity, where fluctuations in visitor numbers or investment flows directly threaten household income and community stability (Bennike & Nielsen, 2024; Ćurčić et al., 2020). Additionally, rising land values and property prices driven by tourism demand frequently reduce housing affordability for residents, accelerating processes of rural gentrification and displacement (Gocer et al., 2021). In some contexts, exploitative business practices and weak regulatory oversight further undermine the long-term sustainability of tourism-led economies, raising concerns about ethical standards and the retention of local benefits (Mahony & Zyl, 2002). Overall, the reviewed literature challenges the assumption that tourism-led rural commodification delivers inclusive and sustainable economic development. While tourism can generate short-term prosperity and diversify rural economies, its long-term economic outcomes are highly uneven and often reproduce dependency, inequality, and vulnerability. These findings underscore the need for governance frameworks that prioritise local ownership, equitable distribution of benefits, and economic diversification beyond tourism, particularly in developing and transitional rural contexts.

The environmental impact in the rural area

Tourism-led rural commodification reshapes rural environments through complex interactions between conservation objectives, market forces, and governance structures. In several contexts, particularly where tourism is aligned with conservation agendas, commodification has contributed to the recreation and aestheticisation of rural landscapes, reinforcing notions of rurality and cultural ambience (Toshio, 2009). Tourism-generated revenues can provide financial incentives and institutional support for the maintenance of natural and cultural heritage sites, especially in protected areas and heritage villages (Ćurčić et al., 2020; Gocer et al., 2021; Sweetman et al., 2019). In such cases, tourism is often framed as a mechanism for reconciling economic development with environmental protection, encouraging ecosystem conservation and, in limited instances, the restoration of degraded landscapes (Laudati, 2010).

However, the reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that these environmental benefits are highly contingent on regulatory capacity, planning frameworks, and the scale of tourism development. In many developing and rapidly transforming rural regions, the commodification of tourism has intensified environmental pressures rather than alleviating them. The influx of visitors and the expansion of tourism

infrastructure frequently result in increased waste generation, pollution, and stress on local ecosystems, particularly where environmental governance is weak or fragmented (Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023; Sweetman et al., 2019; Wang & Li, 2021). Inadequate sewage and waste management systems exacerbate water pollution, leading to nutrient loading and the degradation of surface and groundwater resources, as documented in studies from South Asia and Africa (Bate & Taylor, 2019; Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023).

A recurring concern across regions is tourism-driven land-use change. The conversion of agricultural land, forests, and coastal areas into accommodation facilities, roads, and recreational spaces disrupts local ecosystems and undermines traditional land-use practices (Negi et al., 2022; Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023; Sweetman et al., 2019). Such transformations not only reduce biodiversity and green cover but also heighten environmental risks, including landslides, flooding, and soil erosion, particularly in ecologically fragile mountain and coastal regions (Negi et al., 2022). Empirical evidence further indicates that declining vegetation cover and increased built-up areas contribute to higher carbon emissions and energy consumption, reflecting the environmental costs of tourism-driven modernization (Negi et al., 2022; Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023; Zhu et al., 2021). Overall, the environmental impacts of tourism-led rural commodification reveal a fundamental tension between conservation narratives and development practices. While tourism can support environmental protection under carefully managed and locally regulated conditions, it more commonly accelerates ecological degradation when driven by growth-oriented market logics. These findings challenge the assumption that tourism inherently promotes environmental sustainability and highlight the need for robust environmental governance, carrying-capacity assessments, and integrated land-use planning to mitigate the long-term ecological costs of commodifying rural tourism. The socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impact has been summarised in Annexure Figure 1.

4.5 Regional patterns and contextual differentiation in tourism-led rural commodification

The impacts of tourism-led rural commodification are not uniform but vary significantly across regions, shaped by historical trajectories, governance structures, market integration, and socio-economic conditions. A comparative reading of the reviewed literature reveals distinct regional patterns that challenge one-size-fits-all interpretations of rural tourism development.

In developing and transitional regions particularly in parts of Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America tourism commodification is frequently entangled with structural inequalities, contested land rights, and externally driven development agendas. Studies from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique, Nepal, India, and Chile demonstrate that while tourism introduces new income streams and global visibility, it often reinforces power asymmetries between local communities, state actors, conservation agencies, and private investors (Abbink, 2009; Gardner, 2012; Laudati, 2010; Baptista, 2011;

Bennike & Nielsen, 2023; Blair et al., 2019). In these contexts, commodification tends to be accompanied by displacement, livelihood insecurity, dependency on tourism revenues, and the erosion of local control over land and cultural resources (Bloch, 2017; di Campli, 2019; Gocer et al., 2021). Environmental degradation and unplanned land-use change further exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in ecologically fragile landscapes (Bate & Taylor, 2019; Negi et al., 2022; Prabhu & Nadaf, 2023).

In contrast, developed regions, particularly in Europe, Japan, South Korea, and parts of North America, exhibit more regulated and institutionally mediated forms of rural commodification. Studies from Portugal, Ireland, Denmark, Romania, Cyprus, Japan, Canada, and South Korea indicate that tourism often operates within established planning frameworks, heritage regimes, and welfare systems (Kneafsey, 2000; Cipollari, 2010; Christou & Sharpley, 2019; Prince, 2017; McMorran, 2005). Here, commodification is less frequently associated with physical displacement and more commonly linked to symbolic restructuring, cultural aestheticisation, and social fragmentation. Issues such as loss of everyday meanings of heritage, staged authenticity, commuter-based workforces, overtourism, and declining liveability emerge as dominant concerns (Alcindor et al., 2021; Kim & Kang, 2020; Cruickshank, 2021). While economic benefits are more stable, cultural alienation and community fatigue signal the social limits of tourism-led development in these settings. China represents a distinct and internally diverse category, occupying a middle position between developing and developed contexts. Across multiple Chinese case studies, tourism-led rural commodification is closely tied to strong state involvement, land reforms, and strategic heritage branding (Chen & Kong, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Ji & Heath, 2023). While tourism has facilitated large-scale rural revitalisation, infrastructure investment, and cultural revalorisation, it has simultaneously intensified rural gentrification, indirect displacement, and identity politics (Kan, 2021; Lu et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Unlike many Western cases, commodification in China is often policy-driven rather than market-led, producing rapid transformations that outpace local adaptive capacities.

5 Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined tourism-led rural commodification across diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts. Synthesising evidence from 64 Scopus-indexed studies, the review demonstrates that rural commodification through tourism is a complex, uneven, and context-dependent process, shaped by governance structures, power relations, market dynamics, and local socio-cultural conditions. The findings reveal that tourism-led commodification can generate economic opportunities, livelihood diversification, and renewed attention to rural cultures and landscapes. In several cases, tourism has contributed to social recognition, community revitalisation, and the revalorisation of local heritage. However, these outcomes are neither uniform nor guaranteed. Across many contexts, particularly in developing and transitional regions, commodification has been associated with displacement, widening social inequalities, cultural distortion, and environmental stress. Even in

developed regions, where material benefits are often more stable, commodification frequently manifests through symbolic appropriation, overtourism, and declining place liveability. A key contribution of this review lies in its identification of regional patterns. In much of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, the commodification of tourism is closely linked to land struggles, external control, and livelihood insecurity. In contrast, in Europe and North America, it more commonly reshapes meanings of place, identity, and everyday life. East and Southeast Asia, especially China, exhibit hybrid trajectories, in which strong state involvement enables rapid rural transformation while simultaneously accelerating gentrification and socio-spatial inequalities. These variations challenge universal models of rural tourism development and underscore the limitations of generalised assumptions within the literature. Overall, the review refines existing knowledge by demonstrating that tourism-led rural commodification is best understood as a negotiated and contested process rather than a linear development pathway. Its impacts are multidimensional and relational, reshaping not only economies but also social relations, cultural expressions, and human–environment interactions. Recognising these complexities is essential for advancing more critical, comparative, and theoretically grounded research on rural tourism and commodification.

6 Implications of the study

Evidence across diverse regional contexts, the review challenges binary framings that position tourism-led rural commodification as either beneficial or detrimental. Instead, the findings reinforce a relational and process-oriented understanding of commodification, demonstrating that governance structures, power asymmetries, market logics, and local socio-cultural conditions shape its outcomes. This contributes to refining commodification theory beyond static interpretations and supports constructivist and political economy perspectives that view rural change as negotiated and contested. Second, the review foregrounds the significance of regional differentiation in shaping trajectories of commodification. Existing literature often treats the impacts of rural tourism as broadly comparable across contexts; however, this synthesis reveals systematic contrasts between developed and developing regions. In the Global South, commodification frequently intersects with land dispossession, livelihood insecurity, and external control. In contrast, in many Global North contexts, it manifests through symbolic appropriation, lifestyle transformation, and pressures on place identity. By making these distinctions explicit, the study contributes to comparative rural tourism theory and cautions against the universalisation of development models. Third, the study integrates social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts within a single analytical framework, demonstrating how these dimensions interact rather than operate independently. For example, economic gains are frequently accompanied by cultural staging and social exclusion, while environmental conservation initiatives may simultaneously reinforce unequal power relations. This integrative perspective strengthens conceptual linkages between tourism studies, rural geography, and

development studies, and highlights the need for more interdisciplinary theorisation of rural transformation under tourism-led commodification. Finally, the findings expose gaps in existing research, particularly the limited attention paid to long-term social restructuring, everyday lived experiences, and intra-community inequalities. This points to the need for future theoretical work that moves beyond impact cataloguing towards deeper engagement with questions of justice, agency, and governance in rural tourism contexts.

From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore that tourism-led rural development cannot be treated as a uniform, purely economic intervention. The uneven distribution of benefits identified across regions and social groups highlights the importance of context-sensitive planning that recognises local histories, cultural meanings, and power relations. Tourism initiatives that prioritise market visibility without safeguarding community participation risk intensifying social fragmentation, cultural alienation, and local resistance. The review also illustrates the critical role of governance and institutional arrangements in mediating tourism outcomes. Cases in which local institutions actively shape tourism development tend to yield more balanced outcomes. In contrast, externally driven or poorly coordinated initiatives are more likely to produce displacement, inequality, and environmental stress. This suggests that greater attention to participatory decision-making, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, and locally embedded management structures is essential for mitigating negative impacts. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of managing the pace and scale of tourism development. Rapid commodification, particularly in environmentally or culturally sensitive rural areas, often outpaces infrastructure capacity and social adaptation, leading to overtourism, landscape degradation, and declining place liveability. Gradual, adaptive approaches that align tourism growth with local carrying capacities emerge as critical considerations. Finally, the study has implications for practitioners and destination managers engaged in heritage, cultural, and community-based tourism. While commodification can enhance visibility and economic viability, excessive standardisation and staged authenticity risk eroding the very cultural distinctiveness that attracts visitors. Maintaining a balance between economic viability and cultural integrity is therefore central to sustaining both community well-being and long-term destination resilience.

7 Limitations and future directions of research

Despite offering a comprehensive synthesis of tourism-led rural commodification, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, and that also open important avenues for future research. First, the review is based exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and published in English. While this ensured a consistent quality threshold and methodological transparency, it inevitably excluded relevant studies published in languages other than English and in regional journals. As a result, certain geographic contexts, particularly parts of Latin America, Africa, and Southern Europe, may be

underrepresented. Future reviews could incorporate multilingual databases or region-specific repositories to provide a more balanced and globally inclusive understanding of rural commodification processes.

Second, although the review adhered to PRISMA guidelines to ensure systematic selection and transparency, the final corpus of 64 articles reflects the specificity of the search terms and inclusion criteria rather than the overall volume of rural tourism research. This focus enabled in-depth engagement with studies explicitly addressing commodification. However, it may have excluded adjacent research on rural development, conservation, heritage management, or land-use change that does not explicitly employ commodification-related terminology. Future research could adopt broader or layered search strategies to capture conceptual overlaps and interdisciplinary contributions, thereby enriching theoretical integration.

Third, there is a clear need for more comparative and longitudinal studies that examine how tourism-led commodification unfolds over time, particularly in relation to shifting governance arrangements, market dynamics, and socio-economic change. Such studies would help distinguish short-term developmental gains from longer-term structural transformations and vulnerabilities.

Fourth, although this review synthesises social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts, the existing literature itself tends to examine these dimensions in isolation. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that these impacts are deeply interconnected; for example, economic restructuring often coincides with cultural staging, social exclusion, and environmental pressures. Future research would therefore benefit from integrative analytical frameworks capable of capturing these interdependencies, including systems-based, political economy, and socio-spatial approaches.

Fifth, the review highlights a notable gap in attention to everyday lived experiences, intra-community inequalities, and power relations. While many studies document impacts at the community level, fewer empirically examine how benefits and costs are distributed across class, gender, land ownership, education, or proximity to tourist zones. Future research should prioritise the measurement of inequality, labour precarity, housing affordability, and access to decision-making, using mixed-methods and participatory approaches to understand better who gains and who is marginalised by tourism-led commodification.

Sixth, governance and institutional arrangements emerge as critical yet under-theorised determinants of commodification outcomes. Empirical evidence points to the influential roles of state agencies, private investors, conservation authorities, and cultural or religious elites, particularly in developing and transitional contexts. Future studies should systematically compare governance models such as

community-led, state-led, and market-driven tourism to assess how different institutional configurations shape social justice, cultural integrity, and environmental sustainability.

Finally, emerging dynamics such as digital platforms, social media visibility, and place branding remain insufficiently examined within the commodification literature. Evidence suggests that digital mediation can accelerate tourism growth while intensifying symbolic appropriation, social division, and spatial pressure in rural areas. Future research should empirically investigate how digital representation reshapes power relations, cultural narratives, and market access in commodified rural destinations.

Conflicts of interest

No potential conflicts were found among the authors.

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Annexure Figure 1: Impact of tourism-led rural commodification (Source: from included 64 articles)

