

Digital Commodification of Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500319>

Received: 01 May 2026; Accepted: 06 May 2026; Published: 30 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This review paper examines how Indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia is shaped by the interconnected dynamics of cultural commodification, authenticity, tourist gaze, and digital transformation, with particular reference to the broader context of Orang Asli tourism. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in tourism studies, Indigenous studies, and cultural representation, the paper argues that commodification in Indigenous tourism should not be viewed solely as an economic process, but as a representational and political process through which cultural meanings are selected, simplified, circulated, and contested. The review shows that tourism may create opportunities for cultural visibility, livelihood diversification, and heritage revitalisation, while simultaneously exposing Indigenous communities to stereotyping, selective authenticity, and unequal control over representation. These tensions are intensified in the digital era, where social media and platform-based tourism systems privilege visual appeal, speed, and shareability, often detaching cultural images from their social and spiritual contexts. The paper proposes a conceptual synthesis in which tourist gaze and digital transformation operate as interrelated representational forces shaping commodification outcomes, while Indigenous agency mediates whether authenticity is preserved, negotiated, transformed, or eroded. It concludes that the key issue is not whether culture enters tourism markets, but whether Indigenous communities retain authority over representation, interpretation, digital circulation, and benefit-sharing. The review contributes a Malaysian perspective to wider debates on Indigenous tourism and identifies directions for more ethical, rights-based, and community-centred tourism governance.

Keywords: Indigenous tourism, cultural commodification, tourist gaze, digital transformation, Mah Meri

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been positioned as a pathway to economic diversification, destination branding, and cultural exchange, particularly in rural and marginal regions with limited alternative development options. Yet tourism is never a neutral encounter. In Indigenous settings, tourism frequently reorganises the meaning, visibility, and value of culture by transforming rituals, performances, craft traditions, stories, landscapes, and identities into attractions for external audiences (Carnegie & McCabe, 2008). Within this process, culture is often expected to be legible, accessible, consumable, and visually persuasive. This tension lies at the heart of contemporary debates on Indigenous cultural tourism. Much of the earlier literature treated commodification primarily as a problem of commercialisation: once culture entered the market, meaning was assumed to diminish and authenticity was assumed to erode (Belk, 2020; Shepherd, 2002). More recent scholarship offers a more nuanced view. It shows that Indigenous communities do not merely absorb market pressures passively; they also interpret, negotiate, resist, and strategically mobilise tourism for livelihood, recognition, and political visibility (Bunten & Graburn, 2018). In this sense, commodification is not only about selling culture, but also about who frames it, who benefits from it, and whose interpretation becomes dominant.

The issue becomes even more complex in the digital era, but not simply because of "social media". Rather, as Dwivedi (2026) argues, platform architectures including recommender systems, search algorithms and content moderation actively "circulate images of Indigenous peoples while softening the legal and ethical context" of their representation. This phenomenon, which Dwivedi terms the algorithmic gaze, extends and intensifies the tourist gaze described by Urry & Larsen (2011) by embedding it within automated systems that reward spectacle, novelty and emotional engagement. Couldry & Mejias (2019) frame this as a form of data colonialism, whereby Indigenous cultural identity becomes "nothing more than a symptom of data collection efforts." Digital infrastructures thus do not merely mediate culture, but they actively reorder it.

This paper develops a review article around that problem. It focuses on Indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia and asks how tourist gaze and digital transformation jointly shape cultural commodification and the negotiation of authenticity. Although the wider debate is international, the Malaysian setting is especially instructive because Orang Asli communities occupy a difficult position within tourism development as they are culturally visible, economically marginalised, and frequently represented through external narratives (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Kamarudin & Ngah, 2007). The article firstly outlines the review approach, then discusses conceptual foundations of Indigenous cultural tourism, cultural commodification, tourist gaze, and digital transformation. It subsequently situates these debates in the Malaysian context and closes with a synthesis of major issues, challenges, and prospects, followed by a conceptual agenda for future research.

Methodological Approach to the Review

This article adopts a thematic narrative review approach but one guided by principles of Indigenous research methodology (Smith, 2021; Tekobbe, 2025). Instead of treating Indigenous communities as objects of study to be described from an external vantage point, this review centres the question: how do Indigenous peoples themselves frame the problems of tourism, representation and digital circulation? Wherever possible, this paper prioritises scholarship that emerges from or engages substantively with Indigenous voices, including recent community-based studies in Malaysia (Bala & Chang, 2025) and comparative Indigenous tourism research (Scheyvens et al., 2021; Hutchison et al., 2021). The review was organised around five interrelated themes: (1) definitions and scope of Indigenous cultural tourism; (2) cultural commodification as a market and representational process; (3) authenticity as contested, negotiated and emergent; (4) tourist gaze as a mechanism of reduction, expectation and asymmetrical power; and (5) digital transformation as an accelerator of cultural circulation and aesthetic filtering, understood specifically through the lenses of algorithmic gaze (Dwivedi, 2026) and data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Malaysian materials were then used to ground the discussion, with particular attention to recent empirical work on Temuan, Mah Meri, Semai and Temiar communities (Heikkilä & Williams-Hunt (2024); Bala & Chang, 2025). Existing studies often discuss commodification, authenticity, digital media and Indigenous agency separately. By bringing them together, this paper clarifies how they operate as part of a shared cultural-political process within tourism. Search strategies included Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar for the period 2015 to 2026, using keyword combinations of "Indigenous tourism," "Orang Asli," "digital," "commodification," "authenticity" and "platform". Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed articles or book chapters engaging substantively with Indigenous governance, representation or digital mediation.

Table 1. Representative concepts underpinning the review

Concept	Representative understanding	Analytical emphasis	Relevance to this paper
Indigenous cultural tourism	Tourism in which Indigenous communities directly manage tourism or contribute their culture as the principal attraction.	Control, participation, representation, rights, benefit distribution.	Clarifies that tourism is not merely about culture on display, but about who governs its use and meaning.
Cultural commodification	Transformation of cultural practices, artefacts, performances,	Exchange value, packaging,	Provides the core lens for understanding how culture

	and identities into marketable goods, services, and experiences.	simplification, branding, circulation.	is reworked for tourism.
Authenticity	A negotiated and socially constructed judgement concerning what is considered real, meaningful, original, or culturally grounded.	Staging, negotiation, emergent authenticity, local meaning.	Shows why authenticity is not fixed and why community perspective matters.
Tourist gaze	A structured way of seeing and evaluating places and peoples through expectations, images, and symbolic consumption.	Selection, visibility, stereotyping, frontstage/backstage dynamics.	Explains how external expectations shape the presentation of Indigenous culture.
Digital transformation	Use of digital platforms, media systems, and immersive technologies to market, circulate, and experience tourism.	Algorithmic visibility, visual aesthetics, platform power, narrative speed.	Explains why commodification is now accelerated and amplified beyond the physical destination.

Source: adapted from Cohen (1988); Kamarudin (2016); Carr et al. (2016); Gravari-Barbas (2018); Buntén & Graburn (2018); Jaworski & Thurlow (2020); Hutchison et al. (2021); Scheyvens et al. (2021);

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous Cultural Tourism: Conceptual Foundations

Indigenous cultural tourism generally refers to tourism activities in which Indigenous communities are directly involved either through ownership, management, cultural performance, interpretation, hosting, or the provision of cultural products (Buntén & Graburn, 2018). The concept is more than a descriptive label since it raises critical questions about control, consent, and authority. In other words, a tourism product may feature Indigenous culture, yet still offer little Indigenous control (Hutchison et al., 2021). Conversely, a community may operate tourism ventures that are economically diversified but culturally grounded in local priorities. The distinction matters because tourism has historically represented Indigenous peoples through exoticizing and essentialising frames.

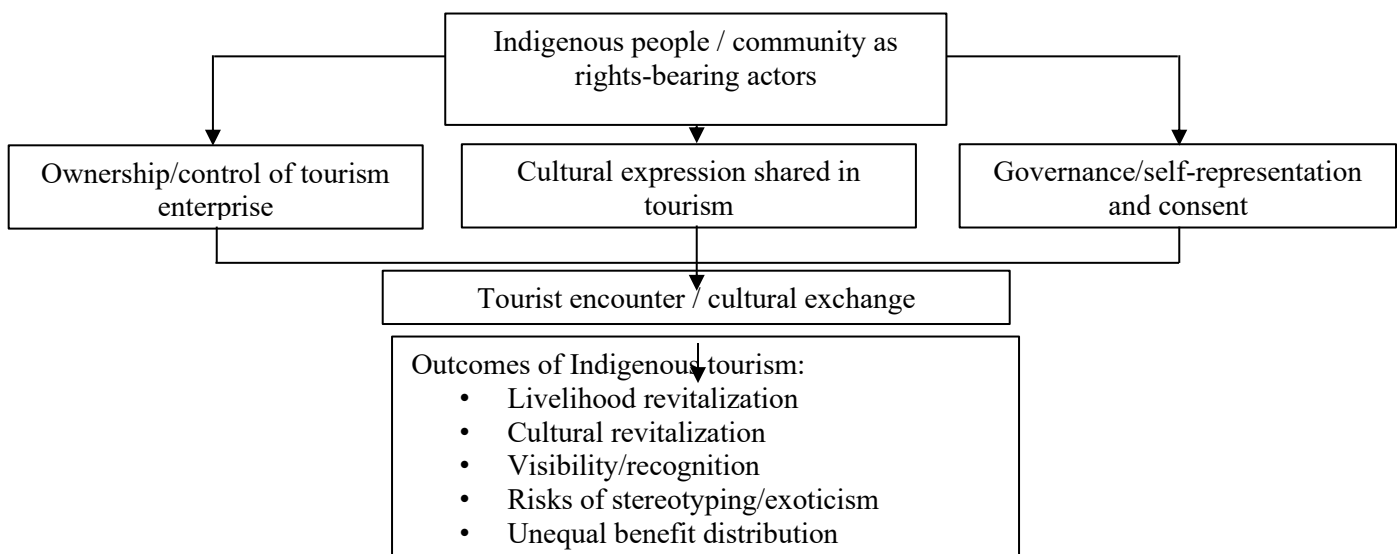


Figure 1. Conceptualisation of Indigenous tourism as a field of cultural exchange, governance, representation, and community control. Source: adapted from Buntén & Graburn (2018); Kamarudin (2016); Carr et al. (2016); Scheyvens et al. (2021); Hutchison et al. (2021)

Early tourism scholarship (e.g., Smith, 1977; Nash, 1989) frequently grouped Indigenous experiences under ethnic tourism, where the attraction depended on viewing supposedly timeless, traditional, or “primitive” others.

That legacy continues to shape how communities are promoted, photographed, narrated, and consumed. Contemporary scholarship has shifted decisively toward questions of self-representation, rights and governance. Fundamental to this shift is Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which argues that research about Indigenous peoples has been complicit in colonial knowledge production unless it centres Indigenous epistemologies and priorities. The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2019), Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility and Ethics, provide a framework that can be extended to Indigenous cultural representation in tourism. In this review, Indigenous cultural tourism is treated as a field of negotiation where culture, economy, identity, and representation intersect (Figure 1). The key analytical issue is not only whether Indigenous culture is present in tourism, but whether communities possess the authority to define what should be shared, how it should be interpreted, and under what conditions tourism participation remains culturally sustainable.

Cultural Commodification and Authenticity in Tourism

Cultural commodification in tourism refers to the process through which cultural expressions are transformed into exchangeable products, performances, images, and experiences (Cohen, 1988; Salazar, 2012). More recent scholarship further conceptualises commodification as a representational and political process, where meanings are not only commercialised but also selectively constructed, circulated, and contested across tourism systems (Tucker & Picard, 2017; Scarles, 2020). In Indigenous tourism contexts, this transformation may involve dance, costume, ritual, crafts, architecture, sacred symbols, culinary practices, storytelling, and even collective identity itself (Bunten, 2010; Bunten & Graburn, 2018). Recent studies highlight that such processes are increasingly mediated through global tourism circuits and digital platforms, where cultural forms are curated and circulated for diverse audiences (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020; Gravari-Barbas, 2018).

Earlier scholarship often framed commodification as a process of cultural degradation, arguing that the incorporation of culture into market systems leads to the erosion of meaning and authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988). This critique remains relevant, particularly in contexts where commodification results in simplification and standardisation, whereby complex traditions are reshaped into repeatable, legible, and marketable forms that satisfy tourist demand (Shepherd, 2002). Contemporary research continues to confirm these concerns, especially in relation to heritage packaging, performativity, and aestheticization under tourism economies (Richards, 2021; Smith, 2021). However, the literature no longer supports a simple binary between authenticity and commodification. Instead, recent scholarship emphasises that commodification is a negotiated and context-dependent process that may simultaneously generate cultural revitalisation, renewed community pride, and new forms of identity expression (Salazar, 2012; Bunten, 2010; Scheyvens et al., 2021). Emerging work further demonstrates that Indigenous communities may strategically engage with tourism markets, selectively adapting cultural expressions while maintaining deeper layers of meaning and control (Bianchi, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The decisive issue is therefore not commodification itself, but the degree of Indigenous authority over representation, interpretation, and benefit distribution.

Authenticity remains central to these debates. Early conceptualisations, particularly those influenced by MacCannell (1973), treated authenticity as an objective property rooted in original or untouched cultural forms. Subsequent work by Cohen (1988) reframed authenticity as socially constructed and negotiated, while Wang (1999) introduced the distinction between objective, constructivist, and existential authenticity. Recent scholarship has further advanced this discussion by emphasising authenticity as performative, relational, and mediated, particularly in contexts shaped by globalisation and digitalisation (Scarles, 2020; Richards, 2021). Authenticity is increasingly understood as emerging through interactions between hosts, tourists, institutions, and digital representations rather than residing in fixed cultural forms. At the same time, communities may perceive commodification as cultural loss when sacred, relational, or socially embedded practices become detached from their original meanings (Shepherd, 2002; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

This tension is particularly evident when rituals are abstracted from spiritual contexts, symbolic objects are detached from ancestral narratives, or performances are repeated primarily for commercial purposes. In such cases, authenticity may persist for external audiences while diminishing from the perspective of local custodians, reinforcing the asymmetrical power relations that underpin cultural representation in tourism.

Tourist Gaze and Digital Transformation in Indigenous Tourism

The concept of the tourist gaze explains how tourism is structured through socially organised ways of seeing, where expectations, images, and prior representations shape what is considered meaningful or desirable in a destination (Urry & Larsen, 2011). In Indigenous tourism contexts, this gaze often privileges visual difference, cultural distinctiveness, and representations of tradition that appear timeless, authentic, and detached from modernity. Such expectations can produce a form of representational selectivity, where certain cultural elements such as ritual performances, costumes, and symbolic artefacts, are repeatedly highlighted, while everyday realities, internal diversity, and contemporary transformations are marginalised (Scarles, 2020; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020). As conceptualised in Figure 2, the tourist gaze constitutes a key external force that shapes cultural representation by generating expectations for cultural readability, visual appeal, and experiential authenticity. These expectations may encourage communities to selectively present culture in ways that align with tourist demand, contributing to processes of staging, simplification, and aestheticization. However, the gaze should not be understood as purely imposed; rather, it is negotiated, with communities sometimes strategically performing expected identities to secure economic opportunities while retaining deeper layers of meaning (Bunten, 2010; Salazar, 2012). Digital transformation phenomena on the other hand, has intensified and extended these dynamics even further. Social media platforms, online travel content, review systems, and influencer cultures now shape destination imaginaries before physical encounters take place, amplifying the reach and speed of cultural representation (Richards, 2021; Scarles, 2020). Within these environments, platform logics privilege content that is visually striking, emotionally engaging, and easily shareable, leading to the circulation of condensed and stylised representations of Indigenous culture (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020). As a result, cultural meanings may be filtered through aesthetic and algorithmic criteria, reinforcing selective visibility and shaping tourist expectations in advance of on-site experiences.

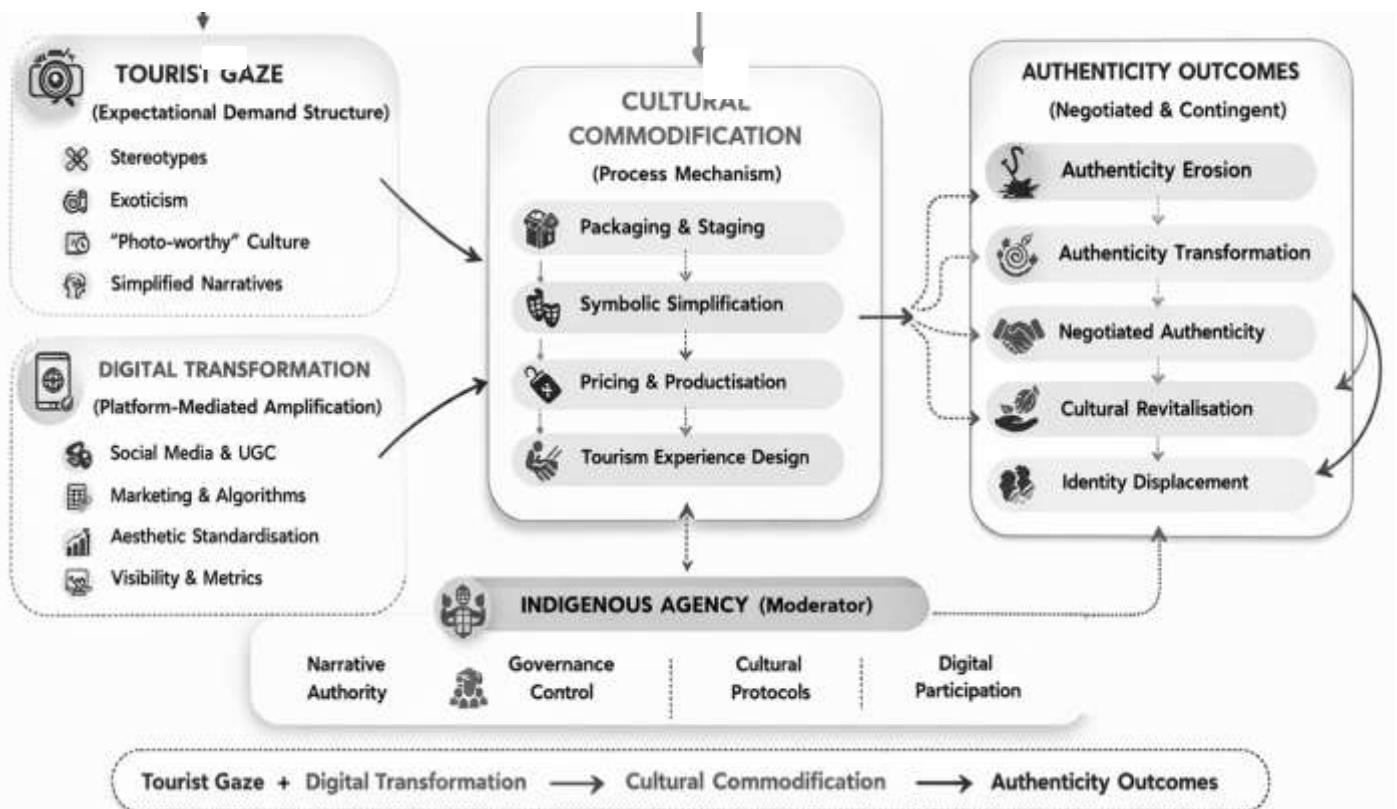


Figure 2. Conceptual framework linking tourist gaze and digital transformation to cultural commodification, authenticity outcomes, moderated by Indigenous agency and governance. Source: adapted from Bunten & Graburn (2018); Kamarudin (2016); Carr et al. (2016); Scheyvens et al. (2021); Hutchison et al. (2021)

Within the conceptual framework (Figure 2), digital transformation operates alongside the tourist gaze to produce representational pressure, which drives the commodification of culture through processes of packaging, standardisation, and visual optimisation. At the same time, digital environments redistribute symbolic power, as tourism operators, influencers, and platform systems increasingly participate in shaping how Indigenous

identities are represented and consumed (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Gravari-Barbas, 2018). Nevertheless, digital transformation also presents opportunities for Indigenous self-representation and narrative control. Communities may utilise digital tools for storytelling, marketing, and cultural preservation, thereby engaging with tourism on more autonomous terms (Scheyvens et al., 2021). This dual character reinforces the central proposition of the framework: that the effects of both tourist gaze and digital mediation are not inherently fixed but depend on the extent of Indigenous agency, governance, and control over representation.

Taken together, the literature suggests that cultural commodification and authenticity in Indigenous tourism should not be analysed as isolated phenomena, but as part of a broader system of representation, power, and mediation. As conceptualised in Figure 2, tourist gaze and digital transformation act as structuring forces that shape how culture is selected, presented, and circulated, producing representational pressures that lead to commodification. Authenticity, in turn, emerges as a negotiated outcome within this process, rather than a fixed property of cultural objects or practices. Crucially, the framework highlights that the outcomes of commodification (whether empowering or extractive), are contingent upon the degree of Indigenous agency, governance, and interpretive control. This shifts the analytical focus away from questioning whether commodification is inherently harmful, toward examining who controls cultural representation, how meanings are constructed, and who benefits from their circulation.

Malaysian Context of Orang Asli Tourism

In Malaysia, Indigenous tourism must be understood within a broader socio-political context shaped by issues of marginality, land rights, development policy, and cultural representation (Kamarudin and Ngah, 2007). The Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia, comprising diverse ethnolinguistic groups with distinct languages, belief systems, and livelihood practices, have historically occupied a peripheral position within national development frameworks (Nicholas, 2010; Gomes, 2004). Despite increasing recognition of their cultural distinctiveness, Orang Asli communities continue to face structural challenges related to land dispossession, limited economic opportunities, and unequal participation in decision-making processes. To offset the decline in rural traditional economic sectors particularly agriculture and forest-related product extractions, tourism has been widely promoted as a strategy for rural development and cultural preservation within this context (Kamarudin, 2016). However, as highlighted in earlier sections, tourism is not a neutral mechanism of development but a field structured by representation, power, and market demand. In the case of Orang Asli tourism, these dynamics are particularly evident in the ways Indigenous identities are constructed, simplified, and circulated for external consumption. Although Orang Asli communities are highly diverse, tourism discourse often collapses this diversity into generalised and homogenised representations of indigeneity, reinforcing what may be understood as representational reduction (Salazar, 2012; Oakes, 2006).

This tendency reflects the influence of the tourist gaze, which privileges visual difference, cultural distinctiveness, and representations of tradition that appear timeless and authentic. As a result, certain cultural elements such as performances, attire, handicrafts, and ritualised practices, are selectively foregrounded, while everyday lived realities, internal diversity, and contemporary transformations are marginalised. In line with the conceptual framework (Figure 2), these dynamics contribute to representational pressures that shape how culture is packaged, staged, and presented within tourism settings. At the same time, Orang Asli tourism is increasingly influenced by digital transformation, which amplifies and extends these processes beyond the physical site of encounter. Tourism websites, social media platforms, promotional videos, and user-generated content now play a central role in shaping destination imaginaries and expectations prior to visitation. Within these digital environments, cultural representations are often filtered through aesthetic and algorithmic logics that prioritise visibility, simplicity, and emotional appeal (Scarles, 2020; Richards, 2021). Consequently, Orang Asli culture may be rendered through stylised and decontextualised images that circulate widely but may not fully reflect the complexity of community life.

Bala & Chang (2025) provide recent empirical data from Temuan, Mah Meri and Semai communities in Selangor. Their study of village leaders' perspectives reveals that while tourism is viewed as a potential pathway out of economic marginalisation, communities are acutely aware of the risks: cultural exploitation, loss of control over sacred sites and the transformation of rituals into performances. Positive examples exist but require careful contextualisation. For example, Temiar community's 'Jok Maduh D'Kenang' ecotourism site in Kelantan is a

community-based model where Temiar themselves manage visitor access, interpret culture and retain revenues. This site emerged from a community-led initiative, not external imposition. Similarly, Fan's work (2021; also, in Loh & Chin, 2023) on the Batek of Taman Negara documents both the pressures of tourism and the possibilities for self-representation when communities control the terms of engagement. Nevertheless, homogenisation remains a risk. Tourism discourse often collapses Orang Asli diversity into generalised representations of "indigeneity", such as rainforest dwellers, craftspeople and ritual performers, while obscuring the distinct languages, histories and contemporary struggles of each group. This representational reduction (Salazar, 2012; Oakes, 2006) mirrors what Smith (2021) critiques as the colonial tendency to treat Indigenous peoples as a single category defined by lack rather than specificity.

Taken together, Orang Asli tourism in Malaysia should be understood as a dynamic and contested field in which cultural meaning, economic value, and representational power are continuously negotiated. This broader contextual understanding provides an essential foundation for examining specific community cases, where these dynamics can be observed in more concrete and locally situated forms.

Issues, Challenges and Prospects of Digital Commodification of Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

A cross-reading of the literature reveals that Indigenous tourism is structured by persistent tensions, now intensified by digital platforms, which align closely with the conceptual framework proposed in Figure 2.

First, representational asymmetry. Indigenous communities are highly visible within tourism imaginaries, yet they often lack proportional influence over the systems that construct and circulate cultural meaning (Salazar, 2012; Scheyvens et al., 2021). This asymmetry is reinforced by tourism institutions, marketing practices, and digital platforms that privilege external narratives over community-defined interpretations. In the digital context, this asymmetry is amplified by platform architectures. As Dwivedi (2026) demonstrates, even when communities attempt to control representation, algorithmic systems may override their preferences by prioritising content that generates engagement, often the most stereotypical or exoticised images. As a result, representation becomes a site of power imbalance, where visibility does not necessarily translate into authority.

Second, selective authenticity and the algorithmic gaze. Tourism systems reward culturally legible, aestheticized, and emotionally resonant forms of representation (Richards, 2021; Scarles, 2020). In line with earlier discussions on authenticity, what is recognised as "authentic" is often shaped less by internal cultural meaning and more by external expectations, including nostalgia, symbolism, and visual spectacle. The algorithmic gaze reinforces this narrowing: platforms learn that users engage with certain types of Indigenous imagery, such as traditional dress, ritual performance and "untouched" nature, and amplify those representations while suppressing images of contemporary Indigenous life, for example communities using smartphones, engaging in politics or simply living ordinary lives. This produces a feedback loop: tourists expect what they have seen online; communities perform to meet those expectations; platforms further amplify the performance.

Third, digital acceleration and context collapse. Digital acceleration intensifies these dynamics by transforming the scale, speed, and reach of cultural circulation. Digital platforms, through algorithmic visibility, user-generated content, and image-driven engagement, extend the tourist gaze beyond physical encounters and embed it within everyday media consumption (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020; Scarles, 2020). Once cultural representations enter these high-velocity networks, they become increasingly difficult for communities to contextualise, regulate, or reclaim, leading to what may be understood as context collapse and the fragmentation of cultural meaning (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Van Eyk (2024) describes this as context collapse: the separation of cultural images from their original meanings, protocols and social relationships. A ritual that is sacred and restricted becomes a 15-second TikTok clip. A craft object with ancestral significance becomes a souvenir photograph circulated without attribution or consent. Digital platforms have no mechanism for honouring Indigenous protocols about who may see certain images or under what conditions.

Together, these tensions generate a set of interrelated challenges. Indigenous communities must continuously negotiate the boundary between economic participation and cultural protection, particularly in relation to sacred knowledge, ritual practices, and socially embedded meanings. Policymakers face the challenge of determining whether tourism governance frameworks genuinely enable Indigenous decision-making or merely incorporate

culture into development agendas without redistributing power (Scheyvens et al., 2021). Tourism operators, meanwhile, must confront the ethical implications of marketing strategies that aestheticize culture while obscuring underlying inequalities. At the level of scholarship, there is an increasing recognition that research itself can reproduce extractive dynamics if Indigenous voices are represented but not centred within knowledge production (Smith, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Table 2. Synthesis of major issues, challenges, and prospects

Theme	Issue / Challenge	Implication for Indigenous Communities	Prospect / Response Direction
Representation	Cultural narratives shaped by external actors (state, operators, platforms)	Limited control over identity and heritage interpretation	Indigenous-led narrative design; community validation of tourism content
Authenticity	Pressure to produce simplified, staged, and visually appealing culture	Potential erosion of cultural depth and meaning	Community-defined authenticity frameworks and cultural protocols
Digital circulation	Rapid, uncontrolled dissemination of cultural images and narratives	Context collapse, stereotyping, loss of interpretive authority	Community-managed digital storytelling; consent-based media practices
Governance	Participation without substantive decision-making power	Unequal benefit distribution and symbolic exploitation	Rights-based governance; co-management and benefit-sharing mechanisms
Research & policy	Indigenous perspectives insufficiently centred	Risk of extractive or technocratic interventions	Participatory, decolonising research and culturally grounded policy design

Source: adapted from Bunten (2010); Salazar (2012); Kamarudin (2016); Scarles (2020); Jaworski & Thurlow (2020); Higgins-Desbiolles (2020); Scheyvens et al. (2021); Richards (2021);

Despite these challenges, the literature identifies emerging prospects aligned with more equitable approaches. Central to these is the expansion of Indigenous-led tourism initiatives, where communities exercise greater control over narrative design, cultural interpretation, and benefit distribution (Bunten, 2010; Scheyvens et al., 2021). In parallel, the development of community-defined authenticity frameworks allows cultural boundaries to be negotiated internally rather than imposed externally. Digital transformation, while often associated with risk, also presents opportunities when approached strategically. Community-managed digital storytelling, culturally informed content strategies, and protocols governing photography and online sharing can help reassert interpretive control within digital environments (Richards, 2021).

Furthermore, participatory governance models, including co-management arrangements, consent-based tourism planning, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, offer pathways for addressing structural imbalances in representation and decision-making. Rather than framing tourism as inherently beneficial or harmful, the literature increasingly suggests that the critical question is how tourism systems are organised, and specifically whether Indigenous communities retain authority over representation, cultural boundaries, and the distribution of value. This reframing shifts the debate from commodification as an outcome to governance and power as determining conditions.

Conceptual Implications and Future Research Agenda

Building on the review, this paper advances the following conceptual proposition namely: Tourist gaze and digital transformation, specifically the algorithmic gaze, operate as interrelated representational forces that shape the commodification of Indigenous culture, while Indigenous agency (grounded in land rights, governance protocols and digital sovereignty) mediates how authenticity is preserved, negotiated, transformed, or eroded. This proposition is significant because it reframes commodification not as an isolated economic process, but as an outcome of interactions between visibility, mediation, and authority. By foregrounding Indigenous agency as a mediating condition, the framework shifts analytical attention toward questions of governance, representation, and control, i.e. issues that remain underexplored in much of the tourism literature.

Future research should pursue several directions:

- Community-centred analyses of digitally mediated authenticity from the perspective of Indigenous actors rather than visitors or platforms. This requires methodologies that respect Indigenous protocols, including the CARE Principles (Carroll et al., 2019)
- Empirical studies of platform architectures, specifically how algorithms on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook actually shape the circulation of Orang Asli imagery.
- Cross-cultural comparative studies across Indigenous settings globally would allow scholars to distinguish between locally specific dynamics and broader structural patterns in tourism
- Comparative research across different Orang Asli groups in Malaysia such as Temuan, Semia, Mah Meri, Temiar, Batek and the others would help illuminate variations in tourism participation, digital engagement, and thresholds of acceptable cultural sharing.

From a policy and practice perspective, ethical tourism development requires governance arrangements that recognise Indigenous communities as rights-holders, with authority over representation, access, interpretation, digital circulation, and benefit allocation (Scheyvens et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Without such arrangements, tourism risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to address.

CONCLUSION

This review has argued that Indigenous cultural tourism in Malaysia should not be understood simply as a question of whether culture is commercialised, but as a deeper struggle over representation, interpretation, and control. By bringing together debates on cultural commodification, authenticity, tourist gaze, and the digital transformation, specified through the concepts of algorithmic gaze (Dwivedi, 2026), data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) and Indigenous data sovereignty (Carroll et al., 2019), the paper shows that tourism is not merely an economic activity but a cultural-political process through which Indigenous identities are framed, circulated, and contested. In the context of Orang Asli tourism, these dynamics are especially significant because cultural visibility often coexists with limited authority over how heritage is interpreted and marketed.

The review further demonstrates that authenticity is neither fixed nor automatically lost through tourism. Rather, it is continuously negotiated through the interaction of community values, visitor expectations, institutional narratives, and increasingly, platform-driven representations. The central issue, therefore, is not whether commodification occurs, but who determines its terms, who benefits from its outcomes and whether communities have the legal security to say no. The paper concludes that more ethical and sustainable Indigenous tourism requires rights-based governance, community-led representation, and stronger Indigenous control over cultural boundaries, digital circulation, and benefit-sharing.

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