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Tangible Cultural Heritage and Tourism: Pressures, Authenticity and Sustainable Management

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Abstract: Tangible cultural heritage, such as monuments, historic towns and archaeological sites, remains a core resource of cultural tourism, yet the relationship between the two is contested. This article reviews how recent literature positions tangible heritage within cultural tourism, what effects tourism is reported to have on heritage sites, and which management approaches are proposed to balance conservation and visitor use. It applies a structured literature review with thematic content analysis to a purposive corpus of ten sources published between 1988 and 2025. Three findings emerge. First, tangible heritage remains the traditional core of cultural tourism but is increasingly framed alongside intangible, everyday and creative forms of culture. Second, the evidence on tourism's effects is mixed: World Heritage status shows inconsistent effects on visitor flows, while overcrowding, commodification and contested authenticity recur as concerns. Third, proposed solutions centre on visitor-capacity management, spatial redistribution, technology, co-creation and ex post evaluation. The study is exploratory: the corpus is small, several sources were read at abstract level, and no primary data were collected.

Keywords: tangible cultural heritage; cultural tourism; World Heritage; authenticity; overtourism; sustainable heritage management

Introduction

Cultural heritage is one of the most widespread resources of world tourism, and heritage tourism is one of its most visible forms (Timothy, 2014). The UNWTO estimates that cultural tourism accounts for more than 39% of international tourist arrivals, equivalent to about 516 million trips in 2017 (Richards, 2018). Built and tangible heritage, such as monuments, historic towns and archaeological sites, has long been one of the foundations of this market (Richards, 2018).

The same growth creates tensions. Overcrowding at World Heritage Sites was already being flagged in 2013 and is now discussed under the label of overtourism (Richards, 2018). Evidence that heritage status or heritage assets attract visitors is less consistent than is often assumed (Noonan & Rizzo, 2017), and turning heritage into a tourism product raises questions about authenticity and local identity (Mousavi et al., 2016). Meanwhile, research attention has moved towards intangible heritage and

everyday culture (Richards, 2018; Timothy, 2014), so the problems of tangible heritage are scattered across several literatures rather than treated together.

"Tangible cultural heritage and tourism" is therefore too broad a topic for a single article. This study narrows it to one problem: how the literature describes the relationship between tourism and the conservation, economic value and meaning of tangible heritage, and what it proposes for managing that relationship. The article is a structured literature review and does not report new empirical data.

Aim and research questions

The aim is to synthesise recent and foundational research on how tourism and tangible cultural heritage affect each other and how that relationship can be managed sustainably. Three research questions guide the review: RQ1. How is tangible cultural heritage positioned within definitions and trends of cultural tourism, and how is that position changing? RQ2. What economic, physical and symbolic (authenticity and identity) effects of tourism on tangible heritage are reported, and how consistent is the evidence? RQ3. What approaches to managing and sustaining tangible heritage under tourism pressure are proposed?

Literature Review

Tangible heritage in definitions of cultural tourism

Cultural tourism is often described as the original form of tourism, with roots in the Grand Tour (Mousavi et al., 2016). A widely used definition from the Association for Tourism and Leisure Research describes it as the movement of people to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence in order to gather new information and experiences that satisfy cultural needs (Richards, 1996, as cited in Richards, 2014). The UNWTO's 2017 definition places the visitor's essential motivation at the centre and covers both tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products (UNWTO, 2017, as cited in Richards, 2018). Mousavi et al. (2016) distinguish two traditions. The "sites and monuments" approach defines cultural tourism by the attractions visited, listing, for example, archaeological sites, architecture and museums, and treats culture as a product. The conceptual approach focuses on motives and meanings and has encouraged a move from culture as product to culture as process, or way of life. The authors conclude that no generally agreed definition exists and that terms such as art tourism or heritage tourism are used interchangeably without a clear framework. Noonan and Rizzo (2017) describe a similar evolution from a narrow link based on immovable heritage to a broad one that includes intangible elements and creative activities, and suggest that the distinction between cultural tourism and tourism in general may be partly false. Within this debate, built and tangible heritage is described as having long been one of the fundaments of cultural tourism, although defining heritage is itself contested (Richards, 2018, citing Timothy, 2011). A major trend identified by Richards (2018) is the shift from tangible to intangible heritage, which Du Cros (2012, as cited in Richards, 2018) links to the conservation problems of tangible heritage and to tourists' search for new experiences. The same direction is visible in Timothy's (2014) account of the "heritagization" of the everyday past and of non-traditional heritage spaces, which enlarges what counts as heritage, and in Richards' (2014) argument that cultural tourism is moving from static museums and monuments towards interactive, intangible experiences.

Economic effects and the World Heritage label Policy interest in heritage is largely economic. According to an OECD report summarised by Richards (2014), the main drivers of culture and tourism policies include valorising and preserving heritage, economic development and employment, regeneration, and diversifying tourism. Barcelona is a frequently cited example: attendance at its cultural attractions rose from about 4 million a year in 1994 to almost 20 million in 2013, and tourists now account for over 70% of admissions (Richards, 2014). Case studies reviewed by Richards (2018) report rapid growth in visitors after listing in Ogimachi, Japan (Jimura, 2011) and favourable resident views of cultural tourism for urban development in Gwangju, Korea (Shin, 2010), although whether tourism income actually reaches heritage and cultural institutions remains debated.

Evidence on whether heritage status itself attracts visitors is mixed. Noonan and Rizzo (2017) report that the effect of UNESCO World Heritage List inscription on tourism flows is controversial. In Italy, inscribed heritage was found to attract domestic tourism to a region, though spatial competition may reduce the effect (Patuelli et al., 2013, as cited in Noonan & Rizzo, 2017), and cultural heritage influenced destination choice for urban recreation trips (van Loon et al., 2014, as cited in Noonan & Rizzo, 2017). Yet inscription was also associated with lower efficiency of tourism destinations in Italian regions, because it raises expectations that are not matched by increased tourism flows (Cuccia et al., 2016, as cited in Noonan & Rizzo, 2017). Frey and Steiner (2011, as cited in Richards, 2018) argue that designation mainly helps sites that national decision-makers overlook, that have little commercial potential and that lack resources for conservation. Adie et al. (2018) surveyed 771 visitors at Independence Hall (USA), Studenica Monastery (Serbia) and Volubilis (Morocco) and found one visitor cluster with higher awareness of the World Heritage brand whose visit decisions were not influenced by it. They describe the brand as a possible "placebo" whose importance is more political than economic and warn against relying on it for tourism development.

Visitor pressure, authenticity and commodification

Physical pressure is the most direct risk. Boniface (2013, as cited in Richards, 2018) already signalled overcrowding at World Heritage Sites, and Richards (2018) notes that mass cultural tourism has produced overcrowding at key sites and complaints in some cities. A master's study of Venice, Pompeii and Herculaneum, and the Valcamonica rock drawings concluded that heavy visitor traffic is a major source of damage (Hastings, 2014). In Mamluk Cairo, Salem et al. (2025) found that actual visitor numbers often exceeded recommended daily capacities of about 1,286 to 2,182 visitors per route, especially in commercial areas where tourism overlaps with residential and religious uses. The social side of crowding is less clear-cut: studies cited by Richards (2018) found both positive and negative effects in Florence (Popp, 2012), no clear link between crowding and resident attitudes in Bruges (Neuts & Nijkamp, 2012), and well-being benefits for residents in ten German cities (Tokarchuk et al., 2017).

Symbolic effects concern authenticity and identity. Mousavi et al. (2016) argue that commodification of culture can erode local identity, since tourism development requires heritage to be presented as a product in exchange for economic benefit, and

they recall Butler's (1990) warning that cultural tourists can act as a "Trojan Horse" for the less acceptable effects of mass tourism. Cohen (1988) offers a counterpoint: authenticity is negotiable rather than fixed, commercialisation does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products and may add new meanings, and new developments can acquire "emergent authenticity" over time. The World Heritage criteria themselves, integrity, authenticity and outstanding universal value, are hard to define and are interpreted differently across cultures (Alberts & Hazen, 2010, as cited in Richards, 2018). Richards (2014) adds that the spread of themed "experiences" risks serial reproduction, with destinations around the world developing similar products. In Melaka, whose listing was linked to its cultural tradition, rising arrivals are reported to have a possible downside (Rodzi et al., 2013).

2.4 Managing and sustaining heritage under tourism pressure

Proposals in the literature fall into several groups. The first concerns visitor management. Hastings (2014) suggests opening alternative routes, reducing numbers in the most-visited areas and educating visitors, while Salem et al. (2025) propose measuring sustainable visitor capacity and a sustainable visitation index for historic urban routes and recommend dynamic management and zoning that recognises residents' use of the same streets. A second group offers integrated frameworks: Loulanski and Loulanski (2011, as cited in Richards, 2018) identified fifteen factors for sustainably integrating heritage and tourism, including local involvement, education and training, authenticity and interpretation, sustainability-focused management and integrated planning.

A third group relies on diversification and technology. Richards (2014) expects augmented reality to reconstruct monuments and enrich historic sites, virtual replicas to relieve crowded places (while noting that for most people physical contact remains the most desired part of the experience), events to give experienced visitors new reasons to return, and creative tourism to develop as an alternative to mass cultural tourism in cities such as Barcelona, Paris and Rome. Timothy (2014) points to the branding of heritage places, cultural routes and intersections with other forms of tourism. A fourth group concerns evaluation and values. Noonan and Rizzo (2017) report that an ex post analysis of the European Capital of Culture Maribor 2012 found far less job creation than the ex ante impact study had projected, and they caution against justifying culture mainly through instrumental economic values. They also note that cultural capital has an economic value, measurable in money, and a multidimensional cultural value that lacks an agreed unit of account (Throsby, 1999, as cited in Noonan & Rizzo, 2017). Richards (2018) likewise calls for measures of cultural, social and knowledge-based value, and for research on governance and on who benefits from new technologies.

Research gap

The reviewed sources approach tangible heritage from different directions: definitions (Mousavi et al., 2016), economics (Noonan & Rizzo, 2017; Adie et al., 2018), conservation (Hastings, 2014; Salem et al., 2025) and trends (Richards, 2014, 2018; Timothy, 2014). They are rarely brought together. Noonan and Rizzo (2017) observe that submissions to their special issue were overwhelmingly empirical applications with little theoretical advancement. The evidence in this corpus also draws

mostly on European cases, with a few sites in Asia, Africa and North America. This review contributes an integrated reading of the corpus around three questions: the position of tangible heritage in cultural tourism, the effects of tourism on it, and the ways of managing those effects.

Methodology Research design

This study adopts an exploratory, qualitative research design based on a structured literature review. Because the paper focuses on synthesising existing academic discussions rather than generating primary empirical data, the methodological framework centres on collecting, categorising, and critically analysing secondary sources related to tangible cultural heritage and tourism.

Corpus selection and search strategy

To ensure a rigorous and focused investigation, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. A corpus of ten core academic sources (including journal articles, books, and reports) published between 1988 and 2025 was compiled. The selection criteria required that each source directly address at least one of the following dimensions:

Definitions and evolving trends of cultural tourism (e.g., Richards, 2014, 2018; Mousavi et al., 2016).

Economic, physical, or symbolic impacts of tourism on tangible heritage assets (e.g., Noonan & Rizzo, 2017; Adie et al., 2018).

Conservation challenges, visitor pressures, and management strategies (e.g., Hastings, 2014; Salem et al., 2025).

Thematic content analysis

The collected corpus was analysed using thematic content analysis. Each source was read and coded to extract recurrent themes corresponding directly to the three research questions (RQs):

How tangible heritage is positioned within broader cultural tourism definitions(RQ1).What specific physical, economic, and symbolic effects are documented (RQ2).What practical and strategic management approaches are proposed to mitigate tourism pressures (RQ3).

Through this qualitative synthesis, arguments and findings across different disciplines (economics, heritage management, and tourism studies) were brought together to form an integrated overview.

Findings

Position of tangible heritage in cultural tourism (RQ1)

The synthesis indicates that while tangible cultural heritage (monuments, archaeological sites, historic city centres) remains the foundational cornerstone of cultural tourism, its positioning is undergoing a paradigm shift. Literature reveals a transition from a rigid "sites and monuments" approach toward a dynamic conceptual approach. Tangible heritage is increasingly consumed alongside intangible heritage, creative industries, and everyday cultural practices.

Physical, economic, and symbolic effects (RQ2)

The reported effects of tourism on tangible heritage are complex and inconsistent across the corpus:

Physical pressures: Overcrowding and physical degradation are acute at primary UNESCO World Heritage Sites (e.g., Venice, Pompeii, Mamluk Cairo), where daily visitor flows routinely exceed recommended carrying capacities.

Economic impacts: Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List shows mixed economic efficacy. While it enhances visibility, empirical studies indicate it does not guarantee proportional increases in visitor expenditure or local conservation funding, occasionally acting as a political "placebo."

Symbolic impacts: Uncontrolled tourism development risks commercialising cultural assets, potentially diluting local identity and authentic heritage meaning.

Management and sustainability approaches (RQ3)

Proposed management strategies identified across the reviewed literature fall into four distinct categories:

Visitor capacity control: Establishing daily capacity thresholds, dynamic ticketing, and spatial zoning to protect vulnerable urban/historic routes.

Diversification and spatial redistribution: Promoting secondary attractions, cultural routes, and off-peak visitation.

Technological integration: Utilizing Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) replicas, and digital interpretation to reduce physical footfall while enriching visitor experience.

Integrated governance and ex post evaluation: Moving beyond ex ante economic projections to adopt holistic evaluation frameworks measuring long-term cultural, social, and knowledge-based value.

Discussion

The findings confirm that tangible cultural heritage cannot be managed in isolation from broader tourism dynamics. The transition from physical monument preservation to integrated experience management highlights the necessity of balancing visitor demand with conservation imperatives.

Theoretical and practical implications

For site managers and policymakers, relying solely on designation brands (such as World Heritage status) is insufficient for sustainable development. Marketing strategies must be linked with visitor-capacity monitoring, spatial management, and community co-creation. Technology offers promising avenues to decentralise crowding, though physical engagement remains the primary desire for most visitors.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the review relies on a relatively small purposive corpus of ten sources. Second, several studies were reviewed at the abstract level without access to full underlying data sets. Third, the geographic representation of cases is predominantly focused on European sites, with fewer cases from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

. Conclusion

This study synthesised literature on the relationship between tangible cultural heritage and tourism. The review demonstrates that while tangible heritage remains central to cultural tourism, sustainable management requires moving beyond simple economic promotion toward dynamic capacity management, technological innovation, and multidimensional value assessment. Future research should focus on empirical

assessments of digital visitor management tools and longitudinal studies evaluating how host communities perceive authenticity under shifting tourism pressures.

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