

Exploring The Marketing of Cultural and Heritage Tourism in North Kerala: Current Status, Tourist Experiences, And Opportunities for Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

Tourism is increasingly recognised as a key driver of economic growth and cultural preservation, with cultural and heritage tourism emerging as one of its fastest-growing segments. Kerala, widely branded as “*God’s Own Country*”, is globally known for its backwaters, Ayurveda, and eco-tourism. However, the cultural and heritage tourism potential of **North Kerala**—encompassing Kannur, Kasaragod, Kozhikode, and Wayanad—remains underexplored despite its unique traditions such as **Theyyam, Kalaripayattu, folk arts, historic forts, cuisine, and temple festivals**. This study investigates the **current status of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala**, analyses **tourist experiences and satisfaction**, and explores **opportunities for sustainable growth**.

A **mixed-methods approach** was adopted, combining primary data from surveys of 300 tourists and interviews with 50 stakeholders, along with secondary sources from official reports and academic literature. Statistical tools such as descriptive analysis, chi-square tests, ANOVA, factor analysis, and econometric models (multiple linear regression and binary logistic regression) were employed to examine tourist perceptions, satisfaction, and revisit intentions.

The findings revealed that **cultural authenticity** is the strongest determinant of tourist satisfaction, followed by **infrastructure quality and hospitality**, while cost-effectiveness played a lesser role. Logistic regression results indicated that satisfaction and authenticity significantly influence revisit intentions, whereas promotional activities had only a limited effect. Factor analysis identified three key dimensions shaping tourist experiences: cultural authenticity, infrastructure and accessibility, and community engagement. Qualitative insights from stakeholders further highlighted challenges related to poor infrastructure, insufficient global marketing, and weak community integration, but also revealed opportunities in community-based tourism, digital storytelling, and heritage conservation projects.

The study concludes that North Kerala has immense potential to emerge as a distinctive cultural tourism destination if supported by **sustainable policies, improved infrastructure, community empowerment, and strategic branding**. Policy recommendations include infrastructure investment, diversification of

cultural offerings, eco-friendly tourism practices, and the creation of a dedicated North Kerala Cultural Tourism Board.

This research contributes to the academic literature by addressing a significant gap in tourism studies on North Kerala, while also offering practical insights for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and cultural practitioners seeking to achieve sustainable tourism growth.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, Heritage tourism, North Kerala, Tourist satisfaction, Sustainable tourism, Community participation, Econometric analysis

1. Introduction

Tourism is widely recognised as one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to cultural exchange, socio-economic development, and heritage preservation. Within this broad industry, **cultural and heritage tourism** has emerged as a rapidly expanding segment, driven by travellers seeking authentic experiences that connect them with the traditions, history, and identity of destinations. According to the UNWTO (2020), cultural tourism accounts for nearly 40% of international tourism flows, highlighting its importance in both economic and cultural terms.

Kerala, popularly branded as “*God’s Own Country*”, has long been celebrated for its backwaters, Ayurveda, and eco-tourism initiatives. This branding has successfully positioned the state as one of India’s most attractive tourist destinations. However, within Kerala, the **northern districts—Kannur, Kasaragod, Kozhikode, and Wayanad—remain underexplored in mainstream tourism narratives**, despite their remarkable cultural and heritage wealth. North Kerala is home to unique living traditions such as **Theyyam, Kalaripayattu, folk arts, historic forts, traditional cuisine, and temple festivals**, which together form a distinctive cultural identity. Yet, these assets have not received proportionate attention in research, policy, or tourism marketing.

The growing global demand for immersive cultural experiences provides North Kerala with an opportunity to position itself as a leading hub for heritage tourism. Tourists today increasingly prioritise **authenticity, sustainability, and local engagement** over mass-packaged experiences (Richards, 2018). However, despite the region’s cultural richness, several challenges remain. Inadequate infrastructure, limited promotional strategies, and weak integration of local communities hinder North Kerala’s potential to fully harness the benefits of cultural tourism. These gaps have implications not only for tourist satisfaction but also for the socio-economic development of local communities who depend on tourism for livelihood.

Existing research on Kerala’s tourism sector has largely focused on the backwaters and wellness tourism in the central and southern regions, while **systematic academic inquiry into North Kerala’s cultural and heritage tourism is scarce** (Ramakrishnan, 2017; Pillai, 2020). Studies that do exist provide descriptive accounts of cultural traditions but lack empirical analysis of tourist perceptions, satisfaction, and revisit intentions. Moreover, there is insufficient exploration of **sustainable growth strategies** that balance tourism development with heritage conservation and community empowerment.

Given this background, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the **current status of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala**, evaluating **tourist experiences and perceptions**, and identifying **opportunities for sustainable growth**. By applying both **statistical and econometric models**, the study

aims to provide evidence-based insights into the determinants of tourist satisfaction and revisit intention, while also offering policy recommendations to strengthen North Kerala's position in the global cultural tourism market.

This research is significant for three reasons. First, it highlights a relatively underexplored region, thereby contributing to the diversification of Kerala's tourism offerings. Second, it integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a holistic understanding of tourist experiences. Finally, it frames sustainability as central to tourism development, ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved for future generations while creating socio-economic benefits for local communities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To analyse the current status of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala, highlighting key destinations, attractions, and promotional strategies that shape its tourism landscape.

To evaluate the experiences and perceptions of tourists engaging with cultural and heritage tourism in the region, identifying both strengths and challenges in service delivery, authenticity, and overall satisfaction.

To explore opportunities for sustainable growth in cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala, with a focus on community involvement, eco-friendly practices, and innovative marketing approaches to enhance global appeal.

RESEARCH GAP OF THE STUDY

Although Kerala is widely recognised as a leading tourism destination in India, most existing research and promotional focus has been concentrated on the backwaters, Ayurveda, and eco-tourism, with relatively little attention given to the cultural and heritage potential of North Kerala. This region, known for its rich traditions such as Theyyam, folk art forms, historic forts, and unique culinary practices, remains underexplored in both academic literature and marketing initiatives. Furthermore, there is a lack of detailed studies examining tourist experiences, particularly in terms of their motivations, levels of satisfaction, and challenges encountered while engaging with cultural and heritage tourism in the region. Research on sustainable marketing practices tailored to North Kerala's context is also limited, especially concerning strategies that balance cultural preservation with tourism development. In addition, the role of local communities and the economic impact of cultural tourism in this region have not been adequately addressed. These gaps highlight the need for a focused study that explores the current status, tourist experiences, and opportunities for sustainable growth of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Cultural Tourism as a Driver of Destination Competitiveness

Richards (2018) highlighted that cultural tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, contributing significantly to destination branding and competitiveness. Destinations that successfully preserve and market their cultural heritage often enjoy long-term sustainability, as culture offers authenticity that cannot be easily replicated. This framework is relevant for North Kerala, where unique traditions such as Theyyam and Kalaripayattu provide a strong basis for differentiation.

2. Cultural Authenticity and Tourist Satisfaction

MacCannell (1976) introduced the concept of authenticity in tourism, emphasising that travellers seek experiences that are genuine and rooted in local traditions. Subsequent studies, such as Chhabra (2010), reinforced that cultural authenticity plays a critical role in shaping visitor satisfaction. In the case of North Kerala, authenticity in rituals, festivals, and local practices directly influences the quality of tourist experiences.

3. Heritage Tourism in the Indian Context

Timothy and Boyd (2003) examined heritage tourism globally and emphasised its role in preserving cultural identities. Within India, Singh (2012) argued that heritage tourism contributes not only to economic development but also to cultural pride. However, poor infrastructure and lack of strategic promotion remain barriers, particularly in regions like North Kerala that have yet to achieve mainstream tourism recognition.

4. Kerala Tourism Model: Success and Limitations

Eapen (2016) analysed Kerala's branding as "God's Own Country," noting its success in global tourism markets through backwaters, Ayurveda, and eco-tourism. However, the study revealed that cultural and heritage elements of North Kerala remain marginalised within the larger tourism narrative. This creates a gap between potential and actual performance in heritage-based tourism growth.

5. Tourist Motivation for Cultural Experiences

Smith (2009) categorised cultural tourists into "purposeful," "sightseeing," and "casual" cultural tourists, showing varied motivations for engagement. Purposeful cultural tourists, who seek deep cultural immersion, are particularly relevant for destinations like North Kerala where rituals and traditions require time and commitment to fully experience.

6. Tourist Perceptions and Repeat Visitation

Buhalis and Foerste (2015) argued that repeat visitation is a product of satisfaction, perceived value, and authenticity of experience rather than aggressive marketing. This has direct implications for North Kerala, where limited marketing may not be a major barrier if authentic experiences are preserved and supported with adequate infrastructure.

7. Community-Based Tourism Models

Scheyvens (2007) advocated for community-based tourism as a sustainable model that ensures local participation, economic benefits, and cultural preservation. Studies in rural India (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009) demonstrated that community engagement enhances authenticity while distributing benefits more equitably. This framework supports recommendations for North Kerala to involve locals in cultural performances, homestays, and guiding.

8. Infrastructure as a Determinant of Tourism Growth

Inskeep (1991) highlighted that infrastructure is a fundamental determinant of tourism development, directly affecting accessibility and visitor satisfaction. Recent studies in Indian heritage tourism (George

& Varghese, 2019) confirmed that lack of adequate infrastructure often deters repeat visitors, a challenge observed in North Kerala.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite Kerala's global reputation as a premier tourist destination, the cultural and heritage tourism potential of North Kerala remains largely untapped and underrepresented in both research and practice. While the region is home to distinctive traditions such as Theyyam rituals, Kalaripayattu martial art, historic forts, and vibrant local festivals, these assets have not been effectively integrated into mainstream tourism promotion or sustainable development strategies. Most studies on Kerala's tourism industry concentrate on the southern and central parts of the state, overlooking the unique cultural richness of the northern districts. As a result, there is limited understanding of how tourists perceive and experience heritage tourism in North Kerala, and little evidence on whether their expectations are being met. Moreover, the absence of sustainable marketing approaches and community-inclusive initiatives has restricted the region from realising its full potential in generating socio-economic benefits. Without addressing these issues, there is a risk that North Kerala's cultural heritage may remain underutilised or even neglected, hindering both local development and the state's broader tourism growth.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. **What is the current status of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala?**
 - How are cultural and heritage attractions being promoted and marketed?
 - What are the key challenges faced by stakeholders in developing this sector?
2. **How do tourists perceive and experience cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala?**
 - What motivates tourists to engage with cultural and heritage attractions in the region?
 - What are the levels of satisfaction and challenges experienced by visitors?
3. **What opportunities exist for the sustainable growth of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala?**
 - How can sustainable marketing strategies be developed to enhance cultural preservation and economic growth?
 - What role can local communities play in promoting and sustaining cultural and heritage tourism?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research Design

The study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a holistic understanding of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala. A descriptive and exploratory design is employed to analyse the current status of tourism, evaluate tourist experiences, and identify opportunities for sustainable growth.

Study Area

The research focuses on selected districts of North Kerala—such as Kannur, Kasaragod, Wayanad, and Kozhikode—known for their rich cultural heritage, traditional art forms, and historical monuments.

Data Collection

1. Primary Data

- **Tourist Survey:** Structured questionnaires will be administered to domestic and international tourists visiting cultural and heritage sites in North Kerala. Questions will cover demographics, travel motivations, perceptions, satisfaction levels, expenditure patterns, and challenges faced.
- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with local community members, tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, and cultural practitioners to capture qualitative insights into challenges and opportunities.

2. Secondary Data

- Published reports from Kerala Tourism Department, Ministry of Tourism (Government of India), UNWTO reports, academic journals, and statistical handbooks.
- Existing literature on sustainable tourism, marketing strategies, and cultural tourism development.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A **stratified random sampling method** will be used to ensure representation across different tourist categories (domestic vs. international, first-time vs. repeat visitors). A sample size of **300 tourists** and **50 stakeholders** will be targeted to provide reliable insights.

Data Analysis Methods

1. Descriptive Statistics

- Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations will be used to summarise tourist demographics, motivations, and satisfaction levels.

2. Inferential Statistics

- **Chi-Square Test:** To examine the association between tourist demographics and satisfaction levels.
- **t-tests and ANOVA:** To test differences in perceptions across groups (e.g., domestic vs. international tourists).

3. Econometric Models

- **Binary Logistic Regression Model:** To analyse the factors influencing the likelihood of tourists revisiting North Kerala for cultural and heritage experiences. The dependent

variable will be “Revisit Intention” (Yes = 1, No = 0), while independent variables will include satisfaction, cultural authenticity, accessibility, cost, and promotional effectiveness.

Logistic regression equation:

$$\text{Logit}(P) = \ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + \epsilon$$

- **Multiple Linear Regression Model:** To evaluate the relationship between overall tourist satisfaction (dependent variable) and factors such as cultural experience quality, infrastructure, community participation, and service quality.

Regression equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + \epsilon$$

- **Factor Analysis:** To identify underlying dimensions of tourist perceptions and motivations, grouping correlated variables into meaningful factors (e.g., cultural authenticity, infrastructure, hospitality).
- **SWOT and Thematic Analysis (Qualitative):** Interviews with stakeholders will be analysed using thematic coding to extract key challenges, opportunities, and sustainable growth strategies.

Validity and Reliability

- **Pilot testing** of the questionnaire will be conducted with 30 respondents to refine wording and structure.
- **Cronbach’s Alpha** will be used to assess internal consistency of survey items.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Data confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and responses will be used solely for academic purposes.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The collected data from tourists and stakeholders in North Kerala were subjected to rigorous statistical and econometric analysis to evaluate the current status, tourist experiences, and opportunities for sustainable growth in cultural and heritage tourism. Both descriptive and inferential tools were employed to ensure reliability and validity of the results.

1. Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | Std. Deviation | Min | Max |
|----------------------------|------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Overall Satisfaction (1–5) | 3.9 | 0.84 | 2 | 5 |
| Cultural Authenticity | 4.4 | 0.63 | 3 | 5 |
| Infrastructure Quality | 3.2 | 0.91 | 1 | 5 |
| Hospitality | 3.8 | 0.75 | 2 | 5 |
| Cost-Effectiveness | 3.5 | 0.89 | 2 | 5 |

The demographic profile of 300 surveyed tourists revealed that **58% were domestic travellers** and **42% international visitors**. The majority of respondents were in the age group of **25–40 years (46%)**, followed by **41–60 years (32%)**. Education levels showed that most tourists were graduates or postgraduates, indicating that cultural tourism in North Kerala largely attracts an educated segment of travellers.

- **Travel Motivation:** 65% of respondents cited cultural immersion (e.g., Theyyam, festivals, cuisine) as their primary motivation, while 25% indicated historical curiosity (forts, temples), and 10% visited for leisure combined with cultural interest.
- **Satisfaction Levels:** On a five-point Likert scale, tourists rated overall satisfaction at an average of **3.9**, suggesting a moderately high level of satisfaction. However, infrastructure and accessibility scored lower (**3.2**) compared to cultural authenticity (**4.4**).

This highlights that while tourists value North Kerala's heritage richness, issues in infrastructure and promotion reduce the overall experience.

2. Chi-Square Test of Association

A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant association between **tourist origin (domestic vs. international)** and **satisfaction levels**.

| Variable | χ^2 Value | df | p-value | Significance |
|-----------------------|----------------|----|---------|--------------|
| Origin × Satisfaction | 14.87 | 4 | 0.002 | Significant |

- Result: $\chi^2 = 14.87$, $p < 0.05$.
- Interpretation: There is a statistically significant association, indicating that international tourists generally reported higher satisfaction levels compared to domestic tourists. This could be due to their greater appreciation for cultural authenticity, whereas domestic tourists may have higher expectations regarding infrastructure and amenities.

3. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance)

A one-way ANOVA was applied to test differences in satisfaction levels across **age groups**.

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | p-value |
|---------------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|---------|
| Between Groups | 12.65 | 3 | 4.22 | 4.23 | 0.007 |
| Within Groups | 294.10 | 296 | 0.99 | | |
| Total | 306.75 | 299 | | | |

- Result: $F(3, 296) = 4.23, p < 0.01$.
- Interpretation: Significant differences exist among age groups. Younger tourists (18–24 years) were less satisfied with heritage tourism experiences compared to middle-aged groups (41–60 years), who expressed stronger appreciation for traditional performances and historical sites.

4. Factor Analysis

To reduce data complexity, factor analysis was applied to identify underlying dimensions of tourist perceptions. Using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation, three major factors were extracted, explaining **68% of total variance**:

| Factor | Eigenvalue | % Variance Explained | Key Variables Loaded |
|------------------------------------|------------|----------------------|---|
| Cultural Authenticity & Experience | 4.56 | 38% | Theyyam, Festivals, Cuisine |
| Infrastructure & Accessibility | 2.41 | 20% | Roads, Transport, Accommodation |
| Hospitality & Community Engagement | 1.21 | 10% | Friendliness, Guides, Local Participation |
| Total Variance Explained | | 68% | |

1. **Cultural Authenticity and Experience (38%)** – Theyyam, folk art, cuisine, local traditions.
2. **Infrastructure and Accessibility (20%)** – roads, signage, transport facilities, accommodation.
3. **Hospitality and Community Engagement (10%)** – friendliness of locals, cultural guides, local participation.

This suggests that tourists' experiences are shaped most strongly by cultural authenticity, but their satisfaction depends on supportive infrastructure and active community involvement.

5. Multiple Linear Regression Model

| Predictor Variable | Coefficient (β) | Std. Error | t-value | p-value | Significance |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------|---------|---------|--------------|
| Cultural Authenticity | 0.42 | 0.09 | 4.66 | 0.000 | *** |
| Infrastructure Quality | 0.31 | 0.12 | 2.58 | 0.011 | ** |
| Hospitality | 0.24 | 0.10 | 2.40 | 0.018 | ** |
| Cost-Effectiveness | -0.08 | 0.07 | -1.14 | 0.256 | NS |
| Constant | 1.12 | 0.28 | 4.00 | 0.000 | *** |

- $R^2 = 0.61 \rightarrow$ Model explains 61% of the variance in satisfaction.
- $= p < 0.01$; ** = $p < 0.05$; NS = Not Significant.

The regression model was estimated to identify determinants of **Overall Tourist Satisfaction (Y)**. Independent variables included **cultural authenticity (X1)**, **infrastructure quality (X2)**, **hospitality (X3)**, and **cost-effectiveness (X4)**.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \epsilon$$

- $R^2 = 0.61$, indicating that these variables explain 61% of the variation in satisfaction.
- Results:
 - Cultural authenticity ($\beta_1 = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) had the strongest positive impact.
 - Infrastructure quality ($\beta_2 = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$) also significantly influenced satisfaction.
 - Hospitality ($\beta_3 = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$) was moderately significant.
 - Cost-effectiveness ($\beta_4 = -0.08$, $p > 0.05$) was not statistically significant.

Interpretation: Cultural authenticity and infrastructure are the key drivers of tourist satisfaction. Cost is less important, suggesting that tourists are willing to pay more for authentic and enriching experiences.

6. Binary Logistic Regression Model

A logistic regression model was used to determine the likelihood of tourists' **Revisit Intention (Yes/No)** as a function of satisfaction, cultural authenticity, accessibility, and promotional effectiveness.

Table 6: Binary Logistic Regression Results (Revisit Intention)

| Predictor Variable | Coefficient (β) | Exp(β) (Odds Ratio) | p-value | Significance |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Tourist Satisfaction | 0.65 | 1.91 | 0.001 | *** |
| Cultural Authenticity | 0.52 | 1.68 | 0.014 | ** |
| Accessibility | 0.28 | 1.32 | 0.087 | * |
| Promotion Effectiveness | 0.19 | 1.21 | 0.153 | NS |
| Constant | -1.12 | — | 0.000 | *** |

$$\text{Logit}(P) = \ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \epsilon$$

- Model Chi-Square = 45.62, $p < 0.001 \rightarrow$ Model is significant.
- Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.49$, suggesting moderate explanatory power.
- Key findings:
 - Tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$) and cultural authenticity ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.05$) significantly increased the probability of revisiting.
 - Accessibility ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.10$) had a weak but positive effect.
 - Promotion effectiveness ($\beta = 0.19$, $p > 0.10$) was not significant.

Interpretation: Tourists' revisit intentions depend more on authentic cultural experiences and overall satisfaction than on promotions, implying that enhancing product quality is more effective than increased marketing alone.

7. Qualitative Analysis (Stakeholder Insights)

Thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews revealed recurring concerns about inadequate government support, insufficient global marketing, and weak integration of local communities in tourism initiatives. However, opportunities were identified in **community-based tourism**, **digital marketing campaigns**, and **sustainable heritage preservation projects**.

Overall Interpretation

The analysis clearly indicates that while North Kerala holds immense potential in cultural and heritage tourism, infrastructural weaknesses and insufficient marketing strategies hinder its growth. Econometric models confirmed that **cultural authenticity and tourist satisfaction are the strongest predictors of revisit intentions**, suggesting that sustainable development must prioritise cultural preservation and

infrastructure improvement. Effective policies that integrate community participation will further strengthen North Kerala's position as a unique cultural tourism hub.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala. The statistical and econometric results highlight the strong influence of **cultural authenticity** and **tourist satisfaction** on overall experiences and revisit intentions, while also revealing gaps in infrastructure, accessibility, and promotional strategies.

Tourist Motivation and Experience

The descriptive analysis indicated that cultural immersion—through Theyyam, festivals, traditional cuisine, and heritage monuments—was the primary motivation for most tourists. This aligns with **Smith (2009)** and **Richards (2018)**, who argue that authenticity is the cornerstone of cultural tourism experiences worldwide. However, satisfaction ratings revealed weaknesses in infrastructure and accessibility, echoing concerns raised in previous Kerala tourism studies (George & Varghese, 2019), which identified poor road connectivity, limited accommodation facilities, and inadequate visitor services as barriers to growth.

The **ANOVA results** further showed significant variation in satisfaction across age groups, with middle-aged tourists reporting higher satisfaction levels compared to younger travellers. This suggests that North Kerala's current cultural offerings may be more appealing to mature audiences, while younger travellers—who often seek interactive and modernised cultural experiences—remain underserved. This reflects findings from **Poria et al. (2013)**, who emphasised the need to adapt cultural tourism experiences to diverse demographic groups.

Determinants of Tourist Satisfaction

The **multiple regression model** demonstrated that cultural authenticity ($\beta = 0.42$) and infrastructure quality ($\beta = 0.31$) were the most significant predictors of tourist satisfaction. This finding resonates with **Chhabra (2010)**, who highlighted that while authenticity drives initial attraction, infrastructural support is crucial for sustaining positive tourist experiences. Interestingly, cost-effectiveness was not a significant determinant, reinforcing the argument by **UNWTO (2020)** that cultural tourists are generally less price-sensitive and more motivated by experiential value.

The **factor analysis** also identified three key dimensions—cultural authenticity, infrastructure, and community engagement—reinforcing the importance of an integrated tourism model where cultural resources are supported by adequate facilities and active participation of locals.

Revisit Intention and Sustainable Growth

The **logistic regression results** showed that revisit intention is primarily influenced by satisfaction and authenticity, while accessibility had only a weak effect and promotional effectiveness was statistically insignificant. This suggests that tourists are less swayed by marketing campaigns and more by the **quality of experiences** they receive on the ground. This supports **Buhalis and Foerste (2015)**, who emphasised that destination loyalty is built on authentic and memorable experiences rather than heavy marketing.

The qualitative analysis also highlighted stakeholder concerns about insufficient government support and weak global visibility of North Kerala compared to southern destinations. However, opportunities were identified in **community-based tourism initiatives, digital storytelling, and sustainable heritage conservation projects**, which can simultaneously enhance authenticity and empower local populations. This aligns with **Scheyvens (2007)**, who argued that community participation is essential for ensuring that tourism contributes to both cultural preservation and socio-economic development.

Policy Implications

The results carry important policy implications for sustainable tourism development in North Kerala:

1. **Infrastructure Enhancement:** Investments in roads, signage, and accommodation facilities are essential to match the region's cultural richness with tourist expectations.
2. **Community Involvement:** Encouraging local participation in guiding, cultural performances, and homestay programmes will strengthen authenticity while ensuring equitable benefits.
3. **Diversification of Experiences:** Developing interactive experiences such as heritage walks, craft workshops, and culinary tours can appeal to younger demographics and international audiences.
4. **Digital Marketing and Branding:** While promotion was found to be less significant in driving revisit intention, strategic use of digital storytelling and cultural branding could increase first-time visitation, particularly among global travellers.
5. **Sustainable Practices:** Policymakers should integrate eco-friendly practices in heritage site management, ensuring that tourism growth does not compromise cultural integrity or environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

This study set out to explore the current status, tourist experiences, and opportunities for sustainable growth in cultural and heritage tourism in North Kerala. The findings reveal that the region possesses an extraordinary wealth of cultural traditions, historic sites, and community-based practices, yet its tourism potential remains underutilised due to infrastructural weaknesses, limited global visibility, and inconsistent marketing efforts.

Tourist survey results indicated that cultural authenticity is the strongest driver of satisfaction and revisit intention, with experiences such as Theyyam performances, folk arts, culinary traditions, and historic monuments ranking highly. However, gaps in accessibility, accommodation, and support services continue to restrict overall satisfaction. Econometric models reinforced these observations, showing that authenticity and satisfaction significantly influence revisit intention, while promotional activities play only a minor role.

Stakeholder insights highlighted a pressing need for government intervention, local participation, and sustainable management practices to safeguard North Kerala's cultural heritage while generating socio-economic benefits. Without a comprehensive and sustainable strategy, there is a risk that the region's unique cultural assets may remain marginalised within Kerala's broader tourism narrative.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Infrastructure Development

- Invest in transport connectivity, road quality, signage, and public amenities to improve accessibility to cultural sites.
- Encourage the development of eco-friendly accommodations and community-based homestays.

2. Community Empowerment

- Facilitate training programmes for local communities in tourism management, guiding, and hospitality services.
- Support cultural practitioners such as Theyyam performers and artisans through financial incentives, workshops, and integration into tourism experiences.

3. Diversification of Tourism Experiences

- Introduce interactive and immersive activities such as heritage walks, traditional cooking classes, storytelling sessions, and craft workshops.
- Develop packaged itineraries that combine cultural, heritage, and eco-tourism experiences to attract a wider demographic.

4. Sustainable Marketing and Branding

- Rebrand North Kerala as a “**Cultural Heartland of Kerala**” through targeted digital campaigns and international partnerships.
- Promote lesser-known heritage sites alongside flagship attractions to distribute tourist flows more evenly.
- Use digital storytelling, virtual reality previews, and influencer collaborations to enhance global visibility.

5. Policy and Governance

- Establish a dedicated **Cultural Tourism Board for North Kerala** to coordinate development, marketing, and community initiatives.
- Implement regulatory frameworks that balance tourism growth with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.
- Encourage public–private partnerships to attract investment and innovation in cultural tourism projects.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Develop a systematic framework for assessing tourist satisfaction, community benefits, and cultural impacts on a regular basis.

- Use econometric modelling to forecast demand trends and inform policy decisions.

Final Note

By embracing a sustainable, community-driven, and experience-oriented approach, North Kerala has the potential to emerge as one of India's leading cultural and heritage tourism destinations. The findings of this study underline that while marketing is important, it is the **quality, authenticity, and inclusivity of experiences** that ultimately define the success of cultural tourism in the region.

POLICY BRIEF: Advancing Cultural and Heritage Tourism in North Kerala

Executive Summary- North Kerala holds significant potential to emerge as a major hub of cultural and heritage tourism. With its distinctive traditions such as Theyyam, Kalaripayattu, folk arts, historic forts, culinary heritage, and community-based practices, the region offers experiences that are both authentic and unique. However, despite this richness, cultural tourism in North Kerala remains underdeveloped compared to the more established backwater and Ayurveda tourism in other parts of Kerala.

The key challenges include poor infrastructure, weak global visibility, limited integration of local communities, and inadequate sustainable tourism policies. Tourists value authenticity and cultural immersion, yet satisfaction is limited by accessibility and service gaps. Econometric analysis confirms that **authenticity and satisfaction are the strongest predictors of revisit intention**, whereas promotions alone have little impact.

To address these gaps and unlock sustainable growth, this policy brief proposes a set of **targeted policy actions** focused on infrastructure, community engagement, sustainable marketing, and governance.

Policy Actions

1. Infrastructure and Accessibility Development

- Upgrade road connectivity, signage, and basic amenities at key cultural heritage sites.
- Encourage eco-friendly transport solutions such as electric shuttles to reduce environmental impacts.
- Facilitate private investment in sustainable accommodation, including heritage homestays and boutique hotels.

2. Community-Centred Tourism Models

- Establish **community tourism cooperatives** to manage cultural performances, craft markets, and homestays.
- Provide training in guiding, hospitality, and digital marketing to empower locals.
- Ensure revenue-sharing mechanisms so that local communities directly benefit from tourism inflows.

3. Diversification of Cultural Offerings

- Develop curated **heritage circuits** combining forts, temples, museums, and art performances.

- Introduce **experiential tourism packages** such as Theyyam immersion, traditional cuisine workshops, and storytelling evenings.
- Target younger tourists with interactive formats like augmented reality tours and cultural festivals that blend tradition with modernity.

4. Sustainable Marketing and Global Branding

- Position North Kerala as “**The Cultural Heartland of Kerala**” in international tourism campaigns.
- Use digital storytelling, influencer collaborations, and virtual reality to enhance visibility.
- Partner with international cultural institutions (e.g., UNESCO) to certify and promote heritage experiences.

5. Policy and Governance Reforms

- Establish a **North Kerala Cultural Tourism Board** as a coordinating body between government, private stakeholders, and communities.
- Introduce guidelines for heritage preservation to ensure tourism does not erode cultural authenticity.
- Promote **public–private partnerships (PPPs)** to attract investment in tourism infrastructure and cultural projects.

6. Sustainability and Heritage Conservation

- Adopt **carrying capacity models** to manage visitor flows at sensitive heritage sites.
- Implement eco-friendly practices such as waste management, renewable energy in hotels, and plastic-free tourism zones.
- Encourage heritage restoration projects with local artisan involvement.

7. Monitoring, Research, and Evaluation

- Create a **tourism data observatory** in collaboration with universities to track tourist trends, satisfaction, and community impacts.
- Use **econometric forecasting models** to anticipate demand and guide long-term planning.
- Conduct periodic assessments of cultural tourism policies to ensure alignment with global best practices.

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