
THROUGH THE TOURIST'S LENS: CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION IN ALBANIA VIA GERMAN TRAVEL BLOGS

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Abstract: As Albania emerges as a growing tourist destination, its unique cultural and historical elements are increasingly subject to global tourism dynamics. This paper explores cultural commodification in Albania, analyzing how it is represented and perceived by tourists through German-speaking travel blogs. Cultural commodification, defined as the transformation of local traditions, customs, and cultural products into commercialized goods for tourism consumption, plays a crucial role in shaping Albania’s cultural landscape. Despite the significance of this phenomenon, there remains a gap in research focusing specifically on Albania, particularly in terms of how tourists frame and contribute to the commodification process. By utilizing travel blogs as qualitative data, this study seeks to uncover how travelers interpret and report their experiences with Albania’s culture. These blogs, offering personal and often candid reflections, serve as valuable sources for examining tourist perceptions, revealing insights into how cultural heritage, folklore, traditions, and everyday life are marketed and consumed. The analysis of these narratives highlights the dual role of tourists as both consumers of culture and agents who contribute to its commodification through their interactions and storytelling. The study also aims to explore how tourism balances consumerism and authenticity, identifying when the commodification of culture enhances tourism or dilutes its authenticity in favor of consumerism.

The existing literature on cultural commodification in tourism emphasizes the tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to the demands of the global tourism market. This paper builds on these discussions by examining how tourism in Albania reflects broader patterns of cultural commodification observed in other regions, while also exploring the specific challenges and opportunities unique to the Albanian context. German-speaking travel blogs provide a contemporary and relevant lens to assess the extent to which Albania’s cultural identity is commodified for tourism and how tourists negotiate notions of authenticity in their experiences.

This research contributes to the academic understanding of cultural commodification in Albania by integrating travel blogs as a source of data, filling a gap in the study of tourism-driven cultural transformations. Through this analysis, the study sheds light on the role of tourism in shaping Albania’s cultural narrative and its place in the global tourism market.

Keywords: Cultural commodification, Albania, Travel blogs, Cultural identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural commodification has become a central theme in tourism studies, especially as emerging destinations like Albania increasingly cater to global markets. As a once isolated country now open to mass tourism, Albania presents a unique case for understanding how local culture is repackaged and sold to tourists. This paper focuses on German-speaking travel blogs as a lens to analyze how tourists perceive and engage with Albania’s culture, thus contributing to the commodification process.

The role of tourists as both consumers and agents of commodification is particularly important in understanding how cultural elements like folklore, traditions, and everyday life are transformed into tourism products. While there is a growing body of research on cultural commodification globally, there is a notable lack of focused studies on Albania, a country undergoing significant tourism-driven changes.

Cultural commodification has become a central theme in tourism studies, especially as emerging destinations like Albania increasingly cater to global markets. This transformation refers to the process by which local traditions, customs, and cultural products are redefined, packaged, and sold for tourism consumption. Such shifts influence both the perception of culture by outsiders and the experiences of local communities. Albania, with its rich cultural history, is undergoing rapid change as it opens to international tourists, particularly from German-speaking countries. These travelers often reflect on their experiences through blogs, which serve as a lens for understanding how culture is commodified for tourism.

The growing body of research on cultural commodification has consistently revealed a tension between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting cultural elements to meet tourist expectations (Adams, 2021; Cohen, 2020). In Albania, this tension manifests in how cultural heritage sites, folklore, and traditional crafts are marketed, sometimes at the expense of their depth and diversity. Tourists, particularly those from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland,

have become significant contributors to this process, both as consumers of these cultural experiences and as agents shaping the ways they are presented (Bianchi, 2018; Todorović & Milenković, 2022). However, despite the global discourse on cultural commodification, Albania remains underexplored in academic research on the subject. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing German-speaking travel blogs as primary data sources, examining how tourists perceive, consume, and influence the commodification of Albanian culture. Through an analysis of these narratives, this research aims to reveal the dual role of tourists as both consumers of cultural experiences and contributors to the ongoing commodification process.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on German-speaking travel blogs as primary sources to analyze how tourists perceive and contribute to the commodification of Albanian culture. Travel blogs provide personal, often candid reflections on tourists' experiences, making them valuable tools for understanding tourism dynamics, particularly those frequently absent in more formal tourism studies. A selection of 20 travel blogs published between 2015 and 2023 was analyzed. This timeframe was chosen to capture contemporary perspectives on tourism in Albania, particularly as the country has grown in popularity as a tourist destination following its increased promotion in European markets. German-speaking tourists from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, who have become significant sources of visitors to Albania, served as the target audience for this study. The blogs were identified using travel blogging platforms, search engines, and social media through keywords such as "Albania travel," "Albanian culture," and "authentic experiences in Albania." Selection criteria for the blogs included: a) Relevance: Blogs focused on cultural experiences in Albania, including visits to historical sites, festivals, and interactions with local communities. b) Audience Reach: Blogs with a broad readership, based on metrics such as social media followers and comments, were prioritized to ensure their impact on shaping public perceptions of Albania. c) Depth of Cultural Commentary: Only blogs offering thoughtful commentary on cultural authenticity, commodification, and interactions with local traditions were included, while blogs providing mere travel tips were excluded.

Thematic analysis was used to explore the recurring concepts related to cultural commodification. This process included the familiarization with the data: each blog post was closely examined to understand its narrative and context, with particular focus on discussions of cultural authenticity, commercialization, and interactions between tourists and locals.

Were also Generated Initial Codes: The blogs were systematically coded to capture recurring themes such as:

- The commodification of cultural elements, including folklore, music, dance, and crafts.
- Expressions of approval or concerns about the authenticity of cultural experiences.
- Descriptions of interactions with locals, framed as either "authentic" or "tourist-driven."
- Narratives highlighting the tourists' roles in shaping the commodification of culture.

For example, a 2018 blog post detailed a German tourist's experience attending a traditional Albanian wedding. Although the event was beautiful, the traveler noted that frequent explanations by tour guides made it feel more like a performance for tourists than an authentic celebration.

After coding, recurring patterns were grouped into broader themes, such as:

- Authenticity vs. Commodification: A tension between tourists' desire for genuine cultural experiences and the commercialization of cultural elements.
- Tourist Interaction and Influence: Tourists' presence often influenced the commodification of local traditions.
- Cultural Heritage as a Product: Albanian cultural heritage was frequently marketed for tourist consumption. For instance, one blogger described how "local crafts and historical narratives have been packaged into neat tourist products" during a visit to Gjirokastër, a city in the southern part of Albania.

The themes were then reviewed to ensure they accurately captured the data, with some blogs highlighting the benefits of Albania's increased accessibility to tourists, while others critiqued the simplification of culture for tourism. Themes were refined to align with existing literature on cultural commodification. For instance, the theme "Authenticity vs. Commodification" encapsulated tourists' quest for authentic experiences alongside the impact of commercialization. Specific blog excerpts were used to demonstrate these themes. One blogger, after visiting the Albanian Riviera, observed, "The locals are proud of their heritage, but much has changed to cater to tourists. Folk music, once part of family gatherings, is now performed nightly at hotels." Another blogger shared a similar sentiment after purchasing a handcrafted rug in Krujë, commenting, "It felt like I was buying a souvenir rather than a piece of history."

To ensure validity, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing the blog findings with academic literature on cultural commodification. This allowed the research to reflect broader trends while emphasizing Albania's unique context. Additionally, an independent researcher reviewed the coding process to ensure reliability, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of 20 German-speaking travel blogs revealed a nuanced relationship between tourism and cultural commodification in Albania. Through thematic analysis, several prominent themes emerged that illuminate the complexities of how tourists engage with, interpret, and contribute to the commodification of Albanian culture.

Authenticity vs. Consumerism

A recurring theme in the blogs was the tension between authentic cultural experiences and the commercialization of local traditions. Many bloggers expressed a desire for genuine encounters with Albanian culture but were often met with performances and products tailored to tourist consumption. Some visitors appreciated the efforts to preserve traditions for a wider audience, but others criticized these experiences as staged and lacking in authenticity. For instance, one blogger noted:

“While attending a folk music performance in a local village, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was more of a show for tourists than a real cultural experience. The songs were beautiful, but the constant explanations and 'tourist-friendly' adjustments took away from the authenticity.”

This theme highlights how the commodification of culture can result in a delicate balance between preservation and simplification, often reducing the cultural richness to meet the expectations of foreign visitors.

Tourists as Cultural Agents

The blogs also underscored the role of tourists as active agents in the commodification process. Through their consumption of local goods and cultural performances, tourists not only shape their own experiences but also influence how local traditions are presented. Many bloggers reflected on their own role in shaping the Albanian cultural landscape, recognizing that their presence contributed to the commercialization of traditional practices. One blogger commented:

“By visiting markets and purchasing traditional crafts, I felt like I was both supporting local artisans and contributing to the commodification of these ancient traditions. It's a fine line between appreciation and exploitation.”

This self-awareness among travelers suggests that they are not passive consumers but rather **co-creators** in how culture is packaged and presented, contributing to the cycle of cultural commodification.

Cultural Heritage as a Commodity

The transformation of Albania's cultural heritage into tourist commodities was a significant theme. Traditional clothing, handicrafts, and performances are frequently marketed as "authentic" experiences, but often at the expense of cultural depth and diversity. For example, one blogger who visited the ancient city of Gjirokastër noted how: *“The local crafts and historical narratives have been packaged into neat tourist products, with shopkeepers explaining the 'authentic' roots of each item. While it was interesting, it felt like I was buying more of a curated souvenir than a piece of history.”*

This theme reveals the ways in which cultural heritage is commodified, sometimes leading to the oversimplification of cultural expressions to make them more accessible to a broad tourist market.

Folklore and Traditions in the Spotlight

Folk music, dance, and festivals emerged as focal points in the narratives of German-speaking tourists. These cultural elements are consistently highlighted as major attractions in Albania's tourism industry. However, their presentation often appeared to be shaped by commercial motives rather than a genuine effort to preserve cultural heritage. Many bloggers noted how performances that were once integral parts of local life are now regularly scheduled for the benefit of tourists, losing some of their original meaning. One blogger observed: *“Every evening at the hotel, there's a folk-dance performance. It's beautiful, but after seeing the same routine repeated night after night, it feels more like a tourist attraction than a celebration of Albania's traditions.”*

This theme emphasizes the commercialization of folk traditions, with an increasing emphasis on regular performances designed to satisfy tourist demand rather than sustain cultural practices for local communities.

Overall, the analysis of German-speaking travel blogs illustrates the complex relationship between tourism and cultural commodification in Albania. Themes such as the tension between authenticity and commercialization, the role of tourists in shaping cultural narratives, and the commodification of cultural heritage underscore the ways in which Albania's cultural landscape is being transformed. While tourism offers opportunities for economic growth and cultural exchange, it also presents challenges in terms of maintaining cultural integrity and depth in the face of growing demand for “authentic” experiences tailored to tourists.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationship between tourism and cultural commodification in Albania. German-speaking tourists, as shown through their blogs, play a dual role: they are both consumers of cultural experiences and active agents in the commodification process. The tension between authenticity and commercialization emerges as a recurring theme, where tourists often seek genuine cultural encounters but are met with curated performances tailored to their expectations.

Moreover, the commodification of cultural heritage, such as traditional crafts and folklore, reveals the fine balance between preserving traditions for local communities and repackaging them for tourism consumption. While some tourists appreciate the opportunity to engage with Albanian culture, others express concerns about the loss of cultural depth. These narratives reflect broader global trends in cultural commodification, yet they also point to the unique context of Albania as an emerging tourist destination with rich but under-researched cultural dynamics.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study sheds light on how tourism-driven cultural commodification unfolds in Albania, particularly through the lens of German-speaking travel blogs. Tourists are not passive observers but active participants in shaping how local traditions are marketed and perceived. The ongoing tension between maintaining cultural authenticity and meeting the demands of the tourism market remains central to the commodification process.

As Albania continues to grow as a tourist destination, future research could explore the long-term effects of this commodification on local communities and cultural heritage preservation. This study contributes to the understanding of how cultural narratives are transformed in response to global tourism, offering insights into both the opportunities and challenges that Albania faces in this evolving landscape.

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