

Research Article

Dynamics of Cultural Commodification in Tourism Development in the Karo Region and Its Implications for Sustainability

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamics of cultural commodification in the tourism development of the Karo region in North Sumatra, Indonesia, an area rich in traditional architecture, rituals, oral arts, and symbolic textiles. Despite its cultural vibrancy, the region faces increasing pressures from tourism growth and digital media exposure, which have led to the transformation of cultural expressions for commercial consumption. The research focuses on how these commodification processes reshape cultural meanings, alter community agency, and challenge the sustainability of Karo cultural identity. The study aims to classify the forms of cultural commodification in Karo tourism and assess their implications for cultural preservation. Using a qualitative methodology, the research integrates a systematic review of literature, analysis of tourism-related documents, and examination of digital cultural representations on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The analysis identifies three forms of commodification: (1) performative commodification, where cultural ceremonies and performances are adapted for tourists; (2) visual commodification, where Karo culture is aestheticized in digital media; and (3) material commodification, seen in the commercialization of cultural symbols like Uis Gara motifs. While these practices create economic opportunities, they also risk diminishing cultural depth and authenticity. The study concludes that enhanced cultural governance, community participation, and responsible creative economy development are crucial for long-term cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Cultural Commodification; Cultural Representation; Digital Heritage; Karo Tourism; Sustainable Cultural Development.

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1. Introduction

Culture-based tourism has become a significant field of inquiry in contemporary social science, particularly as globalization, digitization, and market-driven consumption increasingly shape how local identities are represented and reproduced. The Karo region of North Sumatra, Indonesia, provides a compelling case for examining these transformations due to its culturally distinctive heritage—including traditional longhouse architecture (Siwaluh Jabu), ritual practices, kinship structures, performing arts, and symbolic textile systems such as Uis Gara (Bangun, 1989). The object of this research is the phenomenon of cultural commodification that emerges as Karo culture is adapted, curated, and commercialized within tourism and digital media ecosystems.

Previous studies on cultural commodification have applied a range of methods, including classical ethnography (Greenwood, 1977), symbolic-interactionist approaches (Cohen, 1988), staged authenticity analysis (MacCannell, 1973), and representation theory (Hall, 1996). Ethnography provides deep contextual insight but is limited in scope when addressing rapidly changing digital environments. Representation studies illuminate how meaning is constructed but lack tools for analyzing community agency. Digital ethnography

and content analysis (Varis, 2016; Pink et al., 2017) allow scalable mapping of cultural circulation on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, yet they often weaken interpretive depth. Thus, each method exhibits strengths and weaknesses, and there remains a methodological gap in integrating cultural interpretation with digital cultural analytics.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns how tourism-driven and media-driven commodification reshapes cultural meaning, modifies cultural performance, and affects long-term cultural sustainability in the Karo region. The accelerating influence of tourism markets can generate economic opportunities, but it also risks simplifying cultural narratives and reducing the depth of cultural symbolism (Salazar, 2012). Without strategic governance, commodification may shift ownership of cultural meaning away from the originating community.

To address this problem, the study proposes an integrated qualitative approach combining thematic analysis, document analysis, and digital content analysis. This enables a multilayered examination of how cultural practices, visual symbols, and material artifacts are recontextualized within tourism and media environments. The study further adopts a sustainability lens to evaluate whether current commodification trends support or undermine cultural resilience.

The contributions of this research are fourfold. First, it offers a conceptual synthesis that bridges classical commodification theory with digital representation frameworks. Second, it provides an empirically grounded mapping of Karo cultural commodification across performative, visual, and material dimensions. Third, it explains how these commodification dynamics intersect with cultural sustainability concerns in highland Indonesian societies. Fourth, it proposes a culturally sensitive governance model to support sustainable tourism development.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Methods.

Method Used	Strengths	Weaknesses	References
Classical Ethnography	Deep cultural insight	Not suited for digital era	Greenwood (1977)
Tourism Anthropology	Strong interpretive value	Often descriptive	Cohen (1988)
Representation Theory	Symbolic meaning analysis	Weak economic analysis	Hall (1996)
Digital Content Analysis	Scalable and digital relevant	Shallow interpretation	Pink et al. (2017)
Thematic Analysis	Systematic qualitative coding	Researcher-dependent	Braun & Clarke (2006)

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Greenwood (1977), Cohen (1988), Hall (1996), Pink et al. (2017), and Braun & Clarke (2006).

Tabel 1 provides a synthesized comparison of the main research methods commonly used in studies of cultural commodification and cultural representation. Classical ethnography and tourism anthropology offer strong interpretive depth and contextual richness, but their descriptive nature and limited applicability to fast-moving digital environments restrict their ability to capture contemporary cultural transformations. Representation theory contributes valuable insight into symbolic meaning-making, yet it lacks analytical strength in assessing economic or structural dimensions of tourism development. Modern methods such as digital content analysis are highly scalable and relevant for analyzing cultural circulation on social media; however, they often lack the depth and nuance of traditional qualitative inquiry. Thematic analysis provides a systematic approach to coding and pattern identification but remains highly dependent on researcher interpretation.

Taken together, the strengths and weaknesses summarized in Table 1 demonstrate a methodological gap in existing literature, no single approach fully captures both the deep cultural meanings embedded in traditional practices and the rapid transformations produced by digital media and tourism markets. This gap justifies the integrated methodological

framework adopted in this study, which combines thematic analysis, document analysis, and digital content examination to generate a more comprehensive understanding of cultural commodification in the Karo region.

2. Literature Review

Cultural commodification has become a central discourse in contemporary tourism, anthropology, and cultural studies, particularly as global mobility and the digital economy accelerate the circulation of identities, symbols, and heritage practices. As tourism increasingly involves the consumption of culture, landscapes, and identities, scholars have examined how local communities negotiate, perform, and reconfigure their traditions in response to market expectations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the transformation of Karo cultural expressions within the broader development of tourism in North Sumatra.

State-of-the-art research in cultural commodification connects three major domains:

- a. anthropological theories of authenticity and cultural change,
- b. representation and media studies, and
- c. sustainability and governance frameworks in tourism.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, the specific cultural system of the Karo—marked by its *rakut sitelu* kinship system, ritual structures, architectural forms, and textile symbolism—remains understudied. Additionally, the intersection between digital media and cultural transformation is recognized globally but insufficiently documented in local Indonesian contexts, particularly in the highland societies of Sumatra.

This literature review synthesizes foundational theories, leading empirical studies, and contemporary digital-media research to establish the conceptual and methodological foundation for analyzing cultural commodification in the Karo region. It emphasizes both convergences and contradictions in previous findings, ultimately identifying gaps that justify the integrated approach used in this study.

Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Commodification

Classical Perspectives on Culture and Tourism

The earliest theoretical foundations originate from anthropological critiques of tourism. Greenwood (1977) argued that tourism often strips cultural practices of their social meaning, transforming them into staged spectacles for consumption. This concept of cultural decontextualization remains central to contemporary debates, highlighting how rituals lose symbolic depth when performed merely as entertainment.

Cohen (1978; 1988) refined the discussion by proposing a continuum of authenticity. Instead of viewing commodification solely as cultural degradation, Cohen acknowledges varying levels of cultural adaptation, emphasizing community agency in negotiating meaning. According to his model, what is considered “authentic” shifts based on social, economic, and experiential factors. This is particularly relevant in Karo contexts where rituals and textiles may serve parallel functions: sacred, social, and commercial.

MacCannell’s (1973) concept of staged authenticity further revolutionized tourism studies by suggesting that tourists seek “backstage” experiences, prompting communities to construct layers of performance. These staged scenarios blur distinctions between genuine tradition and curated cultural display. In tourism destinations such as Toraja and Bali, staged authenticity manifests in ritual performances that are shortened, rearranged, or reinterpreted.

Similar tendencies can be found in emerging Karo tourism, where performances such as *landek* (dance) and *perkolong-kolong* (singing) are modified to align with tourist demands.

Representation, Identity, and Discourse

Theoretical frameworks from cultural studies further enrich the understanding of how cultural meaning is constructed. Hall (1996) conceptualizes representation as the process through which meaning is produced and exchanged within society. Visual, linguistic, and performative elements act as signifying systems that influence how cultural identity is perceived both internally and externally.

Bruner (1994) asserts that culture in tourism settings becomes a form of narrative production, shaped not only by local communities but also by tourists, governments, and commercial actors. This idea aligns with Salazar's (2012) concept of tourism imaginaries, which highlights how global expectations shape local cultural representation. For the Karo community, the portrayal of *Sivalub Jabu* architecture or *Uis Gara* textiles in tourism media constructs particular narratives of identity—sometimes oversimplified or romanticized.

Digital Ethnography and Mediated Cultural Expression

With the rise of digital platforms, scholars have increasingly examined how culture circulates in virtual environments. Pink et al. (2017) and Varis (2016) propose digital ethnography as a method to study online cultural practices, emphasizing multimodality and networked communication. In digital tourism, visual representations often emphasize aesthetics over cultural accuracy, producing new forms of commodification. TikTok videos, YouTube vlogs, and Instagram reels showcasing Karo dance or traditional clothing frequently prioritize entertainment value, influencing perceptions of authenticity.

These theories collectively serve as a conceptual foundation for analyzing Karo cultural commodification, especially as traditional expressions intersect with digital representation.

Empirical Studies on Tourism, Culture, and Digital Transformation

Commodification in Southeast Asian and Indonesian Cultural Contexts

Empirical studies from Southeast Asia reveal patterns of cultural transformation under tourism influence. In Bali, Picard (1996) documented how culture is reinvented as a tourist commodity, reshaping ritual practices and identity discourse. Adams (1997) observed similar dynamics in Toraja, where funerary rituals are repackaged to fit tourist schedules. In Malaysia and Thailand, scholars such as Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell (1993) described how festivals and indigenous expressions evolve through interactions with tourist expectations.

In Vietnam's Sa Pa region, Turner (2010) found that ethnic minority performances are selectively curated, leading to both cultural empowerment and commercialization. These studies demonstrate that commodification yields complex outcomes, including identity negotiation, economic gain, and symbolic tension.

Cultural Performance and Material Culture in Tourism

Research on performative commodification shows that cultural performances tend to be shortened, dramatized, or hybridized to enhance tourist appeal. For example, Bruner (2005) documented how Maasai performances in Kenya shifted toward tourist expectations of "wildness." In Indonesia, similar processes occur in Yogyakarta's Jathilan and Bali's Kecak dance. Karo performances—*landek*, *gendang guro-guro aron*, and *perkolong-kolong*—are susceptible to similar reinterpretations, especially when uploaded to digital platforms.

Material cultural studies similarly note how traditional artifacts become commercialized. Textile commodification is well-documented among the Batak, Toraja, and Minangkabau communities, where motifs are reproduced for fashion industries. The Karo *Uis Gara* textile is increasingly visible in tourism markets, raising questions about meaning preservation and cultural ownership.

Digital Tourism, Social Media, and Cultural Visibility

Recent empirical research highlights digital media as a significant driver of cultural transformation. Richards (2020) notes that digital platforms enable “hyper-visibility,” where cultural symbols circulate faster and wider than their original social contexts. Scolari (2018) emphasizes that algorithmic trends shape what becomes culturally prominent online.

In Indonesia, studies by Setiawan (2021) and Putri (2022) show that local traditions on TikTok gain visibility but risk being aestheticized without context. For the Karo, digital content showcasing rituals, dances, architecture, or culinary traditions often emphasizes aesthetics, producing a form of visual commodification that differs from traditional tourism commodification.

Cultural Commodification in the Karo Context (The Gap)

Despite substantial global research, very few studies provide a focused examination of Karo cultural commodification. Existing Karo studies predominantly address:

- a. kinship (*rakut sitelu*)
- b. architectural traditions (*Sivalub Jabu*)
- c. rituals such as *kerja tabun*
- d. textile symbolism (*Uis Gara*)

However, limited research explores:

- a. how Karo culture is represented in tourism
- b. how performances are adapted for visitors
- c. how digital content reshapes identity
- d. how commodification impacts cultural sustainability

This represents a major empirical and conceptual gap that this study directly addresses.

Research Gap Summary Table

Research Area	What Previous Studies Found	What Remains Missing (Gap)	How This Study Fills the Gap
Cultural Commodification (Global)	Well-theorized; many case studies	Limited Indonesian highland contexts	Provides Karo-based analysis
Indonesian Tourism	Strong Bali–Toraja focus	Minimal research on Karo	Introduces Karo-specific mapping
Digital Media & Culture	Digital ethnography emerging	Very few studies on ethnic digital representation in Sumatra	Combines digital & cultural analysis
Sustainability	Discussed conceptually	Lacks cultural-specific frameworks	Proposes sustainability model for Karo

Synthesis: Why This Literature Matters

The reviewed literature collectively demonstrates:

- a. Existing theories explain *how* culture is commodified, but not how these dynamics unfold in Karo **society**.
- b. Digital platforms accelerate commodification in new ways that older theories do not fully predict.
- c. Empirical studies in Indonesia focus overwhelmingly on Bali, Yogyakarta, and Toraja not Karo.
- d. No research integrates tourism anthropology, representation theory, and digital content analysis in the context of the Karo region.

Therefore, this literature review not only situates the study in established scholarship but also justifies the conceptual and methodological innovations of this research.

3. Materials and Method

This study adopts an integrated qualitative methodological framework designed to analyze how cultural expressions in the Karo region undergo commodification across traditional, tourism, and digital environments. The methodological design follows a multi-stage process that ensures analytical rigor, transparency, and replicability—criteria that align with international publication standards. The approach combines thematic analysis, document analysis, and digital content analysis to generate a comprehensive interpretation of cultural transformation.

Research Design

The study uses a multi-method qualitative design, selected due to the complexity of cultural commodification, which involves symbolic, performative, material, and digital dimensions. A single-method approach (e.g., classical ethnography or content analysis alone) would not adequately capture the layered transformation of cultural meaning; therefore, methodological integration provides a broader and deeper analytical lens.

The research design incorporates three methodological pillars:

- a. Document and Literature Analysis – to contextualize traditional Karo cultural forms (rituals, architecture, textiles).
- b. Tourism Media Analysis – to assess how cultural elements are curated, simplified, or restructured for tourism purposes.
- c. Digital Content Analysis – to examine how social media platforms shape new cultural representations and potentially accelerate commodification.

This blended design allows triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

Document Sources

Data were collected from ethnographic literature, cultural archives, government publications, and tourism promotional materials. These documents provide historical and cultural grounding for identifying the original meanings and functions of Karo cultural expressions.

Digital Content Sources

Digital data were retrieved from YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram using keywords related to Karo rituals (*kerja tabun*), performances (*landek*, *gendang guro-guro aron*), textile motifs (*Uis Gara*), and architecture (*Sivaluh Jabu*). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select:

- a. videos with $\geq 10,000$ views,
- b. posts with high engagement rates,
- c. content explicitly labeled as “Karo culture,”
- d. tourism-oriented promotional content.

A total of 132 digital items were analyzed.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included: content explicitly referencing Karo cultural representations.

Excluded: content unrelated to culture (e.g., personal vlogs unrelated to heritage), or low-quality items lacking cultural indicators.

Data Collection Procedures

The research followed a four-step systematic data collection process:

1. Identification of cultural artifacts and media representations across multiple platforms.
2. Screening based on inclusion criteria and cultural relevance.
3. Classification into three domains:
 - a. Traditional cultural expressions
 - b. Tourism representations
 - c. Digital media representations
4. Archiving of all collected items into a structured dataset with descriptive metadata (date, platform, topic, engagement, cultural category).

This process ensures transparency and replicability.

Data Analysis Procedures

Coding and Thematic Construction

The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol:

1. Familiarization
2. Initial coding (open coding)
3. Categorization (axial coding)
4. Theme development
5. Review and refinement
6. Interpretation

Coding was performed manually using cross-media comparison to ensure both depth (traditional context) and breadth (digital transformation).

Cross-Representation Comparative Analysis

A three-dimensional comparative framework was applied:

1. Traditional \rightarrow Tourism: shifts in symbolic meaning
2. Tourism \rightarrow Digital: aestheticization and simplification patterns
3. Traditional \rightarrow Digital: authenticity negotiation and hybridization

This analytic design identifies how meaning travels, transforms, and sometimes fragments across representational environments.

Analytical Framework and Algorithm

To ensure clarity and replicability, the methodological workflow is expressed in the form of a pseudo-algorithm.

Algorithm 1. Integrated Cultural Commodification Analysis**INPUT:** Cultural documents, tourism media, digital content**OUTPUT:** Consolidated themes of cultural commodification**Step 1:** Collect cultural data from traditional, tourism, and digital sources**Step 2:** Organize and classify data into analytic categories**Step 3:** Perform open coding to isolate meaning units**Step 4:** Conduct axial coding to link conceptual elements**Step 5:** Apply thematic synthesis to form higher-order themes**Step 6:** Execute cross-representation comparison**Step 7:** Evaluate sustainability and cultural impact**Step 8:** Generate final analytical model**Research Quality and Validity Assurance**

To ensure methodological robustness, three validation strategies were applied:

(1) Triangulation

Data triangulation across traditional, tourism, and digital sources strengthens interpretive accuracy.

(2) Inter-coder Reliability

A subset (20%) of coded data was reviewed by a second analyst, yielding a Cohen's Kappa score of **0.84**, indicating strong agreement.

(3) Reflexive Validity

The researcher documented analytical decisions throughout the process to minimize interpretive bias.

Ethical Considerations

This study uses publicly available digital content. Ethical guidelines for social media research (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019) were followed, ensuring:

1. anonymity of content creators
2. non-disclosure of usernames
3. use of aggregated data only

No intervention or contact with participants was involved.

Summary of the Methodological Contribution

This methodological framework contributes to the literature by:

1. Integrating traditional cultural analysis with digital content analysis.
2. Providing a replicable cross-representation comparison model.
3. Embedding sustainability evaluation in cultural commodification studies.

This design is suitable for the complex dynamics of cultural change in the Karo region.

Tabel 3 Data Sources Overview.

Data Category	Description	Source / Platform	Quantity	Purpose in Analysis
Traditional Cultural Documents	Ethnographic texts, academic papers, cultural archives on Karo rituals, kinship, architecture, textiles	Books, journals, cultural institutions	42 items	Identify original meanings & cultural functions
Tourism Media	Promotional materials, brochures, advertisements, cultural event documentation	Tourism boards, local government, travel agencies	26 items	Assess tourism-oriented representations
Social Media Videos	Short-form videos of rituals, dance, clothing, architecture	TikTok, YouTube	74 videos	Identify performative & aesthetic transformations
Social Media Images	Images of textiles, performances, landmarks	Instagram, Facebook	38 posts	Analyze visual commodification
Digital Journalism	News coverage on Karo cultural festivals & tourism initiatives	Online news portals	12 articles	Assess narrative framing in digital media
Policy Documents	Government reports on tourism & cultural programs	Ministry of Tourism, local govt.	8 documents	Evaluate governance & sustainability contexts

Source: Authors' compilation and synthesis (2025).

Table 3 provides a comprehensive summary of all data sources utilized in this study, demonstrating how each category contributes to a multi-layered analytical design. Given that cultural commodification is a multidimensional phenomenon—emerging simultaneously in traditional, tourism, and digital spaces—a transparent overview of data sources is essential for ensuring methodological rigor and replicability.

The first data category consists of traditional cultural documents, including ethnographic literature, academic studies, and cultural archives related to Karo rituals, kinship structures, architecture, and textile symbolism. These sources form the conceptual foundation of the study, enabling an understanding of the original meanings embedded within cultural expressions. Such baseline knowledge is critical for assessing the extent and nature of representational shifts that occur when cultural elements are adapted for tourism or digital media.

The second category includes tourism media materials such as brochures, promotional content, event documentation, and destination marketing materials produced by government institutions or private tourism agencies. These sources reveal how cultural elements are curated, simplified, or re-framed to meet visitor expectations. Because tourism media often shape public perceptions of cultural identity, their analysis provides insight into institutionalized narratives and branding strategies that influence cultural commodification.

The third and fourth categories draw from social media platforms—specifically YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Videos and images selected through purposive sampling reflect some of the most visible and widely circulated representations of Karo culture in digital environments. These materials capture emerging patterns of digital aestheticization, user-driven reinterpretation, and algorithm-influenced visibility. As such, they offer crucial empirical evidence of how cultural forms are transformed, popularized, or fragmented in online spaces.

The fifth category, digital journalism, includes online news articles covering festivals, cultural events, or policy developments related to the Karo community. These sources contribute a broader socio-cultural perspective by showing how cultural issues are framed in mainstream media discourse.

Finally, policy documents from government bodies provide insights into the institutional frameworks shaping cultural preservation, tourism development, and economic initiatives. These documents enable an evaluation of governance structures that influence the sustainability of cultural commodification.

Taken together, the data sources summarized in Table 3.1 illustrate the use of a robust multi-source triangulation strategy. This approach strengthens the validity of the study by capturing cultural representation across different media forms and interpretive contexts—traditional, performative, institutional, and digital. Such methodological breadth is essential for analyzing the complex dynamics of cultural commodification in the Karo region.

Tabel 4 Coding Framework for Cultural Commodification Analysis.

Coding Stage	Description	Analytical Focus	Example Codes
Open Coding	Initial identification of meaning units from all sources	Symbolic elements, visual motifs, performance cues	“dance posture,” “ritual object,” “tourist framing,” “Uis Gara motif”
Axial Coding	Grouping meaning units into conceptual clusters	Cultural function, narrative framing, aesthetic changes	“commercial adaptation,” “visual simplification,” “ritual reinterpretation”
Selective/Thematic Coding	Integration of clusters into broader conceptual themes	Patterns of commodification across media	“Performative commodification,” “digital aestheticization,” “symbolic dilution,” “cultural resilience”

Coding Stage	Description	Analytical Focus	Example Codes
Cross-Media Comparison	Linking themes across traditional, tourism, and digital domains	Transformations in meaning, representation shifts	“traditional vs. digital meaning,” “tourism-driven hybridization”
Sustainability Evaluation	Assessing long-term cultural impact	Continuity, risk, resilience	“cultural risk,” “economic value,” “loss of symbolism”

Source: Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006), Pink et al. (2017), Hall (1996), and authors' methodology.

Table 4 outlines the coding framework that guided the analytical process of this study, illustrating how raw cultural data were systematically transformed into higher-order themes. Because cultural commodification involves multilayered meaning-making across traditional, tourism, and digital contexts, a structured coding system is essential for ensuring analytical coherence and interpretive depth.

The first stage, open coding, involves breaking down data into discrete meaning units. These units may include symbolic elements, ritual objects, architectural motifs, or performance cues appearing in both traditional documents and digital media. Open coding enables the identification of micro-level cultural indicators, forming the foundational building blocks of analysis.

The second stage, axial coding, links these meaning units into broader conceptual clusters. At this stage, relationships among codes—such as commercial adaptation, visual simplification, or ritual reinterpretation begin to emerge. Axial coding captures the structural patterns within the data, revealing how cultural elements shift when recontextualized in tourism-oriented or digital environments.

The third stage, selective or thematic coding, integrates these clusters into overarching analytical themes. These themes reflect the core patterns of cultural commodification identified in the study, such as performative commodification, digital aestheticization, symbolic dilution, and cultural resilience. Thematic coding allows for the synthesis of insights from diverse data sources into coherent interpretive categories.

A fourth component of the framework, cross-media comparison, evaluates how themes differ or align across traditional cultural expressions, tourism representations, and social media content. This step is crucial because it highlights representational shifts that may not be visible within any single medium but become evident when multiple sources are analyzed in parallel.

Finally, the sustainability evaluation stage assesses the long-term implications of each theme for cultural preservation. This includes analyzing whether commodification strengthens economic opportunities, risks symbolic erosion, or results in hybridized forms of cultural identity. In this sense, the coding framework not only organizes empirical observations but also connects them to broader theoretical concerns related to cultural continuity and transformation.

Overall, Table 3.2 demonstrates that the analytical process is methodologically grounded, transparent, and replicable. The multi-stage coding strategy supported by

triangulation across data types—ensures that the study captures the complex dynamics of cultural commodification in a manner consistent with international qualitative research standards.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, derived from triangulated data across traditional cultural sources, tourism media, and digital platforms. The analysis identifies a set of recurring themes that illuminate how Karo cultural expressions are reinterpreted, simplified, and commercialized in contemporary cultural and tourism environments. The results highlight both the transformative and contested nature of cultural commodification, illustrating how cultural meaning shifts as it moves across representational contexts.

Overview of Emergent Themes

The thematic analysis produced four major themes:

1. Performative Commodification
2. Visual and Material Simplification
3. Narrative Reframing and Symbolic Dilution
4. Digital Aestheticization and Algorithmic Influence

These themes reflect cross-media patterns identified through the coding framework (Table 3.2) and reveal how cultural elements undergo representational transformation when adapted to tourism and digital platforms.

Theme 1: Performative Commodification

Performative elements of Karo culture—particularly *landek* (dance), *gendang guro-guro aron* (youth performance), and *perkolong-kolong* (traditional singing)—show significant transformation when repurposed for tourism stages. Analysis of tourism media reveals that performances are often shortened, choreographed differently, or recontextualized to meet tourist expectations for entertainment and visual dynamism.

For instance, traditional *guro-guro aron* involves intricate communal roles, symbolic call-and-response patterns, and ritualized sequences, yet tourism performances prioritize condensed versions emphasizing rhythm and spectacle. Such shifts mirror similar findings in Bali (Picard, 1996) and Toraja (Adams, 1997), indicating that performative cultural commodification is a structural phenomenon in Indonesian tourism.

Across 74 analyzed digital videos, performative content is frequently edited, stylized with music overlays, and adapted to suit platform algorithms—further distancing the representation from its original ceremonial meaning.

Finding:

Performative commodification results in the reconfiguration of cultural expressions from ritual significance toward entertainment-oriented spectacle.

Theme 2: Visual and Material Simplification

Material culture especially *Uis Gara* textiles, traditional clothing, and architectural icons—exhibits patterns of symbolic simplification in both tourism products and digital visual media.

Key patterns identified:

1. Motifs are extracted from their ritual contexts and repurposed into fashion products.
2. Architectural elements of *Simaluh Jabu* (traditional longhouse) are stylized into logo designs or tourism branding.

3. Colors and patterns of *Uis Gara* are frequently modified to match modern aesthetic trends.

Across Instagram and TikTok content, *Uis Gara* often appears as a decorative accessory rather than as a bearer of kinship meaning. This aligns with global studies where ethnic textiles are commodified as ethnic chic fashion (Turner 2010; Bruner 2005).

Finding:

Visual and material cultural elements are increasingly detached from their symbolic meanings, contributing to the rise of simplified and aestheticized forms of cultural commodification.

Theme 3: Narrative Reframing and Symbolic Dilution

Tourism media and digital journalism frequently reframe Karo culture through thematic narratives emphasizing exoticism, identity branding, and cultural nostalgia.

Observed narrative shifts:

1. Rituals are framed as “unique attractions” rather than sacred practices.
2. Architectural forms are described primarily for their photogenic value.
3. Cultural identity is presented through selective markers rather than holistic systems.

Digital journalism often presents cultural festivals through economic and entertainment-focused narratives, overshadowing spiritual or socio-cultural meanings. This parallels Salazar’s (2012) concept of *tourism imaginaries*, where cultural identity is produced through institutional storytelling.

Finding:

Narrative reframing creates symbolic dilution, in which cultural meanings are selectively emphasized, muted, or reorganized to appeal to external audiences.

Theme 4: Digital Aestheticization and Algorithmic Influence

Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping cultural visibility. The analysis shows that digital aestheticization—driven by platform algorithms—leads to new forms of cultural commodification.

Key observations:

1. TikTok videos of Karo dance prioritize attractive visuals and trending music.
2. YouTube vlogs emphasize spectacle, scenic views, and cultural “highlights.”
3. Instagram posts feature curated aesthetics, filters, and stylized poses.

Algorithmic influence prioritizes content that is visually appealing, fast-paced, and emotionally engaging—criteria that often conflict with the slower, symbolic, and ritual nature of traditional cultural expressions.

Finding:

Digital platforms accelerate aestheticization, producing high-visibility cultural fragments that overshadow or replace culturally embedded meanings.

Cross-Media Comparative Findings

A cross-analysis between traditional, tourism, and digital data reveals the following broader patterns:

Traditional Context	Tourism Context	Digital Context
Ritual depth	Entertainment focus	Aesthetic + algorithmic focus
Symbolic meaning	Narrative branding	Visual fragmentation
Community agency	Institutional curation	User-generated reinterpretation
Cultural continuity	Commercialization	Viral trends reshape meaning

Synthesis:

Cultural meaning is progressively compressed, curated, and fragmented as it transitions across representational domains. This three-stage transformation underscores the dynamic nature of cultural commodification in the Karo region.

Implications for Cultural Sustainability

The pattern of commodification identified in the analysis presents both opportunities and risks:

Opportunities:

1. Increased cultural visibility
2. New creative-economy markets
3. Tourism-driven income for cultural groups

Risks:

1. Symbolic dilution
2. Loss of ritual integrity
3. Identity fragmentation
4. External ownership over cultural narratives

The findings reinforce the need for culturally sensitive governance models to ensure that commodification supports rather than undermines cultural resilience.

5. Comparison

This section provides a comparative evaluation between the findings of the present study and previous research on cultural commodification in global, regional, and Indonesian contexts. The comparison highlights both convergences and divergences in patterns of cultural transformation, representation, and sustainability, thereby situating the contribution of this research within the broader academic landscape.

Comparison with Classical Studies of Cultural Commodification

The findings of this study corroborate several foundational theories in cultural tourism. Similar to Greenwood's (1977) argument that commodified performances lose their ritual value, the results illustrate how Karo ritual performances—particularly *guro-guro aron* and *lan-dek*—undergo symbolic reduction when adapted for tourism and digital media.

Cohen's (1988) continuum of authenticity is also reflected in the Karo context:

1. Some cultural actors deliberately adapt performances to appeal to visitors (constructive authenticity).
2. Others attempt to retain original ritual meanings (objective authenticity).

The coexistence of these positions aligns with Cohen's notion of negotiated cultural meaning.

MacCannell's concept of staged authenticity (1973) is further validated by instances where Karo performances are modified for public events, tour packages, or digital consumption. However, unlike many staged scenarios observed in Bali or Toraja, Karo staging often occurs through *informal* and *community-led* initiatives rather than through large-scale tourism institutions. This distinction highlights a more grassroots-driven process of commodification in Karo society.

Comparison with Representation and Identity Theory

Hall's (1996) representation theory emphasizes that cultural identities are constructed through meaning-making processes mediated by power and discourse. This study extends Hall's framework by demonstrating that modern digital platforms—particularly TikTok and Instagram—act as new discursive arenas where cultural meaning is curated and redistributed through user-generated content.

Compared to global studies on representation, the Karo case presents two unique dynamics:

1. Hybrid identity performance—traditional cultural elements are combined with modern aesthetics, internet humor, or global music trends.
2. Algorithmic mediation—visibility is shaped not only by audience preferences but also by platform algorithms.

This extends representation theory to incorporate digital and algorithmic forces seldom discussed in earlier cultural studies literature.

Comparison with Southeast Asian Cultural Tourism Research

Prior studies on Bali (Picard, 1996), Toraja (Adams, 1997), and Sa Pa (Turner, 2010) identify similar commodification patterns: ritual simplification, festival commercialization, and rebranding of indigenous identity. The Karo case displays comparable dynamics, yet with notable distinctions:

Similarities with Regional Studies

1. Rituals transformed into cultural attractions
2. Traditional clothing recontextualized as souvenirs
3. Narratives framed around “uniqueness” and “exotic identity”

Differences Observed

1. **Scale of Tourism:** Karo tourism is smaller and more community-driven compared to the highly institutionalized cases of Bali and Toraja.
2. **Digital Dominance:** Karo cultural visibility is driven heavily by social media, whereas Bali's image has long relied on global tourism marketing.
3. **Cultural Autonomy:** Karo communities maintain stronger agency in cultural presentation, with less involvement from large tourism corporations.

Thus, the Karo case contributes a more decentralized and community-centered model of commodification to Southeast Asian literature.

Comparison with Indonesian Digital Culture Studies

While digital ethnography is increasingly used in studies of Indonesian cultural representation, existing research has largely focused on:

1. Javanese dance on YouTube
2. Balinese rituals on Instagram
3. Papuan identity narratives on TikTok

Compared to these studies (Setiawan, 2021; Putri, 2022), the present research provides:

New Contributions

1. A **Sumatran highland perspective**, filling a geographical gap.
2. A combined model connecting **traditional–tourism–digital** representations.
3. An emphasis on **algorithmic influence**, rarely analyzed in Indonesian cultural research.

This demonstrates how Karo cultural visibility is not merely a product of user creativity but is heavily shaped by digital platform structures.

Comparison Across Media Forms

The cross-media analysis in this study shows a multi-stage transformation of cultural meaning:

Representation Context	Meaning Characteristics	Degree of Commodification
Traditional	Symbolic depth, ritual embeddedness	Low
Tourism	Selective framing, entertainment value	Moderate
Digital	Visual fragmentation, aestheticization, virality	High

Compared to other ethnocultural studies, the Karo transformation pattern is consistent with global digital trends (Richards, 2020), but differs in that Karo content often retains traces of local humor and performative spontaneity.

Comparison of Sustainability Outcomes

Cultural sustainability literature (Murzyn-Kupisz, 2013; Throsby, 2019) notes that commodification can both support and undermine cultural resilience. This study reaches a similar conclusion but extends the discourse in several ways:

Convergence

1. Economic benefits coexist with symbolic loss
2. Tourism generates visibility but risks oversimplification

Divergence / Contribution

1. In the Karo context, digital commodification is more influential than tourism commodification.
2. Cultural dilution occurs not through mass tourism, but through viral content cycles and algorithmic visibility.

This suggests a shift from tourism-centered to digitally-driven cultural transformation, adding nuance to sustainability discussions.

Overall Synthesis

In comparison to existing global and regional literature, this study contributes:

1. A multi-medium model of cultural commodification integrating traditional, tourism, and digital representations.
2. Evidence of algorithmic influence on cultural visibility—an underdeveloped area in cultural tourism research.
3. A Karo-specific perspective, filling a significant gap in Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies.
4. A nuanced view of cultural sustainability under digital transformation pressures.

These comparative insights confirm the relevance of the findings while highlighting the unique characteristics of cultural commodification in the Karo region.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the dynamics of cultural commodification in the Karo region of North Sumatra by integrating traditional cultural analysis, tourism media interpretation, and digital content analysis. The findings demonstrate that cultural representation in Karo society is shaped by a multi-layered transformation that occurs as cultural expressions move across traditional, tourism, and digital environments. This transformation reveals four dominant patterns: performative commodification, visual and material simplification, narrative reframing, and digital aestheticization influenced by platform algorithms.

The research shows that traditional cultural expressions—such as landek, guro-guro aron, Uis Gara textiles, and Siwaluh Jabu architecture—undergo significant shifts in meaning when reinterpreted for tourism or displayed on social media platforms. These changes involve the condensation of ritual elements, the selective highlighting of visually appealing components, and the reframing of cultural identity within tourism and digital narratives. Notably, digital platforms play a central role in accelerating aestheticization, producing visible yet fragmented cultural representations that circulate widely but often lack contextual depth.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by expanding classical commodification frameworks (Greenwood, Cohen, MacCannell) and representation theory (Hall) into the context of digital media. It shows that contemporary commodification is not solely shaped by tourism markets but is increasingly influenced by algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement, visibility, and trend-driven content. This represents an important development in cultural tourism studies, where algorithmic visibility has not been extensively theorized.

Practically, the findings provide insight for cultural stakeholders, including local governments, cultural institutions, and tourism practitioners. The results suggest that the development of sustainable cultural tourism in the Karo region requires a governance model that balances economic opportunities with cultural integrity. Community-led initiatives, cultural education, and strategic digital documentation are needed to ensure that commodification does not result in symbolic erosion or misrepresentation.

This study also acknowledges its limitations. It primarily relies on publicly available digital content and did not include ethnographic fieldwork or interviews due to scope constraints. As such, deeper community perspectives and ritual practitioners' voices remain underrepresented. Future research should incorporate field-based ethnography, longitudinal studies of cultural transformation, and platform-specific algorithmic analysis to understand how digital visibility shapes cultural meaning over time.

In conclusion, cultural commodification in the Karo region reflects a complex interplay between tradition, tourism, and digital media. While commodification can enhance cultural visibility and economic opportunity, it also poses risks of symbolic dilution and representational distortion. By revealing these patterns, this study provides a foundation for developing culturally sensitive and sustainability-oriented approaches to heritage management and tourism development in Karo society..

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