




Overtourism and the decay of cultural identity: A case study in Hoi An ancient town

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ABSTRACT

Overtourism in popular destinations puts pressure on the environment, infrastructure, and local cultural values. This study analyses the relationship between overtourism and the erosion of cultural identity in Hoi An ancient town, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. This study adopts a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach, in which qualitative research methods were applied through in-depth interviews with residents, artisans, tourism businesses, and visitors. The findings reveal that overtourism has transformed traditional cultural practices, reduced community–tourist interactions, and increased the risk of cultural loss. The study proposes sustainable management measures, including visitor flow control, responsible tourism practices, and community involvement in heritage conservation.

Keywords: overtourism, cultural identity, Hoi An ancient town, sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

In the context of global tourism development, many popular destinations are facing the phenomenon of overtourism, which exerts significant pressure on the environment, infrastructure, social life, and particularly on traditional cultural values (Pham, 2021; UNWTO, 2018). Hoi An Ancient Town, a UNESCO-recognised World Cultural Heritage site, is renowned for its ancient architecture, traditional craft villages, and distinctive cuisine. However, it has increasingly become a destination visibly affected by the surge in tourist numbers. The excessive influx of visitors not only overloads tourism services and infrastructure but also alters cultural practices, reduces interactions between the local community and tourists, and consequently threatens the preservation of local cultural identity (Nguyen, 2020).

Previous studies have primarily focused on the economic impacts of tourism, heritage management strategies, and conservation efforts, but have remained limited in analysing the direct effects of overtourism on the erosion of cultural identity. Some research has suggested that the commercialisation of culture and the declining interaction between residents and tourists have transformed traditional rituals, festivals, and crafts; however, detailed analyses based on empirical data from Hoi An Ancient Town are still lacking (Smith, 2019). This highlights the urgent need for further research into the relationship between overtourism and cultural transformation, aiming to propose sustainable

management solutions suitable for this heritage site. Based on this rationale, the present study aims to:

- (1) Analyse the impacts of overtourism on cultural practices and cultural identity in Hoi An Ancient Town;
- (2) Identify the mechanisms leading to the erosion of traditional cultural values; and
- (3) Propose sustainable management solutions, including visitor control, responsible tourism development, and enhanced community participation in heritage conservation.

A qualitative research approach was employed through in-depth interviews with local residents, craft artisans, tourism business owners, heritage managers, and tourists to achieve these objectives. Additionally, direct observation of tourism activities and review of relevant secondary data were conducted. This approach enables the collection of detailed and contextually grounded data, reflecting the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, thereby providing a solid foundation for analysing the impacts of overtourism on cultural identity and identifying key factors necessary for sustainable tourism development in Hoi An Ancient Town.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Concepts

The concept of overtourism has been systematised in recent decades as a multidimensional phenomenon that

extends beyond excessive visitor numbers to include issues of governance, benefit distribution, and residents' quality of life. Rather than relying solely on traditional notions of carrying capacity, recent scholarship emphasises a governance-oriented perspective, focusing on how policies, planning frameworks, and community perceptions shape whether a destination is perceived as experiencing overtourism (UNWTO, 2018). This perspective underscores the need to examine not only tourist volumes but also institutional responses and the sustainability of urban and heritage systems.

Within heritage destinations, cultural identity encompasses both tangible elements, such as architecture and spatial organisation, and intangible dimensions, including rituals, traditional crafts, and locally embedded knowledge systems. Existing literature highlights tourism's dual role: while it can support conservation efforts, it may also drive cultural commodification and forms of "staged authenticity" that weaken original meanings and disrupt processes of cultural transmission (Cohen, 1988; Timothy, 2007).

Building on this foundation, cultural identity erosion is understood as the gradual weakening, transformation, or loss of cultural meanings, values, practices, and social functions when these expressions are increasingly shaped by external economic, political, or tourism-driven forces rather than sustained through endogenous, community-based transmission and everyday social practice (Cohen, 1988; Richards, 2018; Su et al., 2020; Timothy, 2007). In heritage tourism contexts, this process often manifests through the performative adaptation of cultural practices, declining community participation, and disruptions in intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Relatedly, the commercialisation rate refers to the relative proportion of cultural activities, practices, or products that are primarily oriented toward tourist consumption and market exchange rather than community use or cultural transmission. In heritage destinations, this rate reflects the extent to which cultural expressions are reconfigured to meet external demand, often involving standardisation, performative modification, and the prioritisation of economic value over social and symbolic meanings (Cohen, 1988; Richards, 2018; Su et al., 2020). Together, these concepts provide an integrated analytical framework for examining how overtourism reshapes cultural identity in living heritage sites.

Overview of Related Studies

Empirical studies across Europe and Asia reveal broadly consistent patterns associated with overtourism. High visitor pressure commonly leads to infrastructure overload, the transformation of traditional livelihoods into tourism-oriented commercial activities, and the performative adaptation or "masking" of rituals for tourist consumption (Capocchi et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020).

In Europe, Venice is frequently cited as a paradigmatic case of overtourism, marked by population decline, pressure on heritage assets, and governance challenges linked to cruise tourism and short-term accommodation. Policy responses including day-entry fees and cruise ship restrictions have demonstrated that quantitative control measures alone are insufficient when not embedded within comprehensive

governance strategies, often resulting in the spatial redistribution rather than the reduction of tourism pressure. Similarly, Barcelona's regulatory measures, such as timed ticketing and rental controls, reveal persistent tensions between visitor management and residents' access to urban and cultural spaces, highlighting the importance of integrating social considerations into tourism governance (Mazzamuto, 2022).

In Asia, Kyoto illustrates the cultural dimensions of overtourism, where congestion at temples and shrines has prompted behavioural guidelines and visitor management strategies. However, recent studies emphasise that such interventions must be accompanied by community engagement to avoid undermining cultural transmission and local livelihoods. Bali presents another instructive case, where overtourism has contributed to ritual commodification, altered ceremonial calendars, and environmental stress, challenging indigenous governance systems and cultural cohesion.

In Vietnam, overtourism has been documented in destinations such as Ha Long, Sa Pa, Da Nang, Hoi An, and Phu Quoc. Early studies warned that uncontrolled visitor growth could exceed environmental and social carrying capacities, leading to resource degradation and declining visitor experiences (Pham, 2002). Subsequent reports by the Tourism Development Research Institute (2020) further identified infrastructure overload and imbalances in benefit distribution within heritage destinations.

Focusing on Hoi An, existing research has highlighted seasonal overcrowding, pressure on transport and waste management systems, and declining resident quality of life (Vo, 2021; Quang Nam Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2023). Vietnamese scholars have also examined tourism-induced cultural transformation, noting the commercialisation of festivals, the standardisation of handicrafts, and the gradual reduction of community participation in traditional cultural spaces (Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2021; Tran, 2018). Collectively, these studies provide important contextual insights but remain largely descriptive.

International Experiences and the Context of Hoi An

Compared with European heritage cities, Hoi An exhibits several distinctive characteristics, including networks of living craft villages, festivals embedded in everyday social life, a mixed structure of domestic and international visitors, and a high degree of household-level economic dependence on tourism. As a form of "living heritage," Hoi An is particularly vulnerable to commercialisation, as shifts toward tourism-oriented production may reduce the time and social space available for cultural transmission. International experiences from Kyoto and Bali suggest that visitor management strategies must be integrated with livelihood support and capacity-building measures, an approach that is especially relevant to Hoi An's socio-cultural context.

Research Gaps and Contributions of the Hoi An Study

Despite the growing body of literature on overtourism and cultural heritage, several gaps remain. First, there is a lack of longitudinal and context-specific evidence capable of elucidating the mechanisms linking overtourism to cultural

identity erosion. Second, few studies have proposed or operationalised standardised indicators to assess cultural erosion in living heritage sites, particularly in developing countries. Third, empirical evaluations of policy effectiveness in mitigating cultural impacts remain limited (Capocchi et al., 2019; Chaney, 2023).

In the Vietnamese context, and in Hoi An specifically, existing research remains fragmented and largely descriptive, offering limited insight into the dynamic processes through which overtourism reshapes cultural identity. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative analysis with descriptive longitudinal indicators and by developing a context-sensitive cultural impact assessment framework. In doing so, it contributes empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian heritage destination and advances theoretical discussions on overtourism, cultural sustainability, and community resilience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitatively driven mixed-methods research design, in which qualitative inquiry constitutes the core analytical framework, while quantitative data play a complementary and illustrative role. The qualitative component is central to exploring stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of cultural transformation under overtourism, whereas quantitative indicators are used descriptively to contextualise and support the interpretation of qualitative findings rather than to establish statistical causality.

Data were collected through a purposive sampling strategy targeting key stakeholder groups involved in tourism development and cultural practices in Hoi An, including local residents, artisans, tourism business operators, tour guides, heritage managers, and local officials. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, providing rich and context-sensitive insights into cultural change processes.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 12 software, following a structured three-stage coding process:

- (1) Open coding to identify emergent concepts,
- (2) Axial coding to establish relationships among themes, and
- (3) Selective coding to integrate core categories related to cultural transformation and cultural identity erosion.

This combination of inductive and deductive coding ensured analytical rigor and transparency.

Quantitative data consisted of survey-based percentages and descriptive time-series indicators covering the period 2020-2024. These data were employed to visualise temporal trends and patterns of change, thereby enhancing the explanatory depth of the qualitative analysis, rather than serving as a basis for inferential or causal testing. The integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence allowed for methodological triangulation and strengthened the robustness of the findings.

The reliability of qualitative results was further enhanced through data triangulation, participant validation, and inter-coder comparison. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. As a single-case study, the findings are inherently context-specific and are not intended for broad generalisation. In addition, data collection conducted during the peak tourist season in 2024 may not fully capture seasonal variations or post-pandemic dynamics. Accordingly, the results should be interpreted as exploratory and interpretive, offering contextually grounded insights rather than confirmatory conclusions.

Research Subjects and Scope

The study adopts a purposive sampling strategy targeting key stakeholder groups directly involved in tourism development and cultural practices in Hoi An. These include:

- (i) Long-term local residents,
- (ii) Artisans and owners of tourism-related businesses,
- (iii) Tourism enterprises and heritage managers, and
- (iv) Domestic and international tourists.

In total, 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to capture diverse perspectives on cultural change and overtourism impacts. The research scope was limited to the ancient town area and adjacent craft villages, such as Thanh Ha and Kim Bong, to reflect the local cultural and social characteristics.

Data Collection Methods

Three primary methods were employed.

In-depth interviews

30 semi-structured interviews with residents, artisans, business owners, managers, and tourists, focusing on experiences and perspectives regarding the impacts of overtourism.

Participant observation

Direct observation of tourism activities, festivals, and community life to identify changes in cultural practices.

Secondary data analysis

Examination of statistical reports, heritage management policies, and previous studies (Nguyen, 2020).

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software, which enabled systematic coding and comparison across key stakeholder groups, including local residents, artisans, tourism businesses, and tourists. The use of NVivo enhanced analytical transparency and contributed to reducing potential researcher bias through structured data management. Coding consistency was ensured through iterative review and cross-checking of emerging themes throughout the analysis process.

The analysis focused on four overarching thematic areas:

- (1) The impacts of overtourism,
- (2) Changes in cultural practices,
- (3) The role of the local community, and

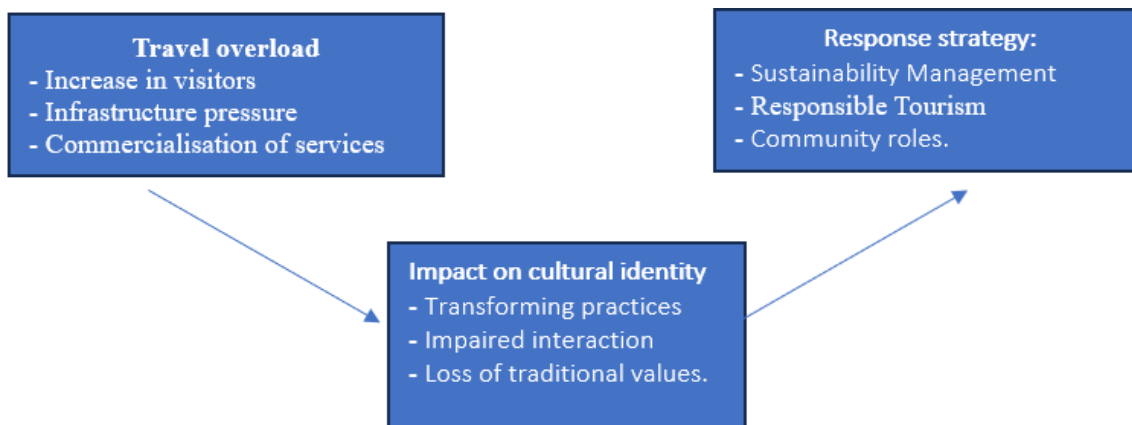


Figure 1. Research model: Overtourism and Hoi An cultural identity (Source: Research results)

(4) Sustainable response strategies.

Content analysis involved comparative examination of stakeholder perspectives to identify both convergences and divergences in experiences and interpretations of tourism-induced cultural change.

To strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings, data derived from in-depth interviews were triangulated with insights from participant observation and relevant secondary sources. This triangulation approach allowed for a more comprehensive and robust interpretation of the socio-cultural impacts of overtourism in Hoi An.

Proposed Research Model

Based on the theoretical framework of tourism impacts on culture (Smith, 2019), the study proposes an analytical model comprising three factors presented in **Figure 1**.

Cultural Identity Erosion Index

The Cultural Identity Erosion Index (CIEI) is a composite, context-specific indicator developed for exploratory assessment rather than statistical generalisation. It comprises four components:

- (1) Degree of cultural commercialisation,
- (2) Level of community participation,
- (3) Continuity of traditional practices, and
- (4) Integrity of cultural meaning.

Each component was assessed using a five-point ordinal scale based on triangulated qualitative evidence, including interviews, observation, and policy reports.

The index does not claim universal validity and is subject to researcher interpretation. Its primary value lies in tracking relative changes over time within the same destination rather than enabling cross-destination comparison. Future studies may refine the index through participatory weighting or cross-case calibration.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Impacts of Overtourism on Spatial and Social Life

Findings from 30 in-depth interviews, field observations, and resident and tourist surveys show that overtourism is

Table 1. The impact of overtourism on space and social life in Hoi An

Survey indicator	Rate (%)
Residents reflect on traffic congestion and overloaded infrastructure	65
Residents think that the cost of living is rising	58
Residents say that the socio-cultural space is shrinking	72
Tourists complain about crowding and overcrowding	60

Source: Research results

generating considerable pressure on spatial conditions and social life in Hoi An.

Among local residents, 65% reported severe traffic congestion and overloaded infrastructure, particularly in the ancient town and along major access routes. 58% indicated rising living costs, which they associated with the increasing dominance of tourism-related services. In addition, 72% stated that traditional socio-cultural spaces have diminished, as commercial activities increasingly occupy areas previously used for community interaction.

From the tourist perspective, 60% reported dissatisfaction related to overcrowding, noting congestion and reduced opportunities for meaningful cultural engagement.

These findings in **Table 1** indicate that overtourism is closely associated with spatial saturation, rising living pressures, and changes in everyday social environments for both residents and visitors.

Changes in Cultural Practices and the Risk of Cultural Identity Erosion

Empirical evidence from 20 in-depth interviews, surveys of 150 residents and 100 tourists, and participant observation reveals notable changes in cultural practices in Hoi An between 2020 and 2024.

Survey results in **Figure 2** show that the proportion of cultural activities primarily oriented toward commercial purposes increased from 40% in 2020 to 70% in 2024. This change was observed across festivals, performing arts, and handicraft production. At the same time, youth participation in traditional cultural practices declined from 35% to 20% during the same period. These changes are reflected in the Cultural Identity Erosion Index, which increased from 2.0 to 4.5 on a five-point scale between 2020 and 2024.

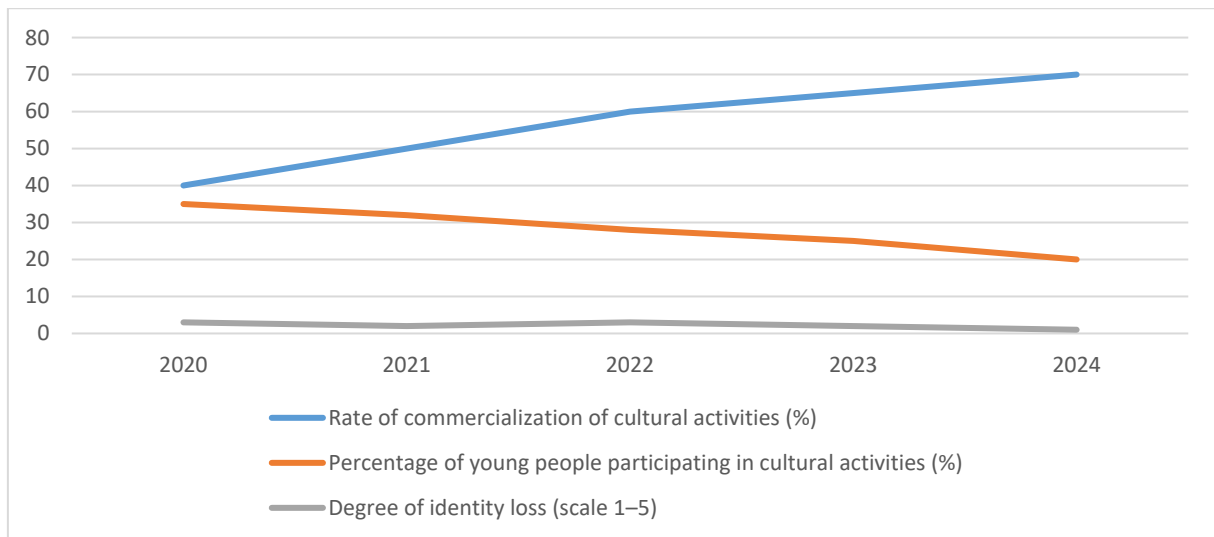


Figure 2. Transformation in cultural practices and the risk of identity loss in Hoi An (2020-2024) (Source: Research results)

Table 2. Comments of residents and visitors on the role of communities in response and conservation

Evaluation content	Residents (%)	Visitors (%)
Communities play a central role in conservation	68	55
The community needs support from the government/business	72	60
Community activities are also formal	41	48
Communities capable of teaching traditional values	64	50
Concerns about the community being commercialised in the role	57	62

Source: Research results

Qualitative accounts further illustrate these patterns. One artisan noted:

Artisan We still make lanterns, but now speed matters more than meaning. Young people no longer learn why the patterns matter; they only learn what sells.

Resident Festivals used to belong to the community. Now they feel like performances scheduled for tourists.

The Role of the Community in Response and Cultural Preservation

Findings in **Table 2** indicate active but uneven community involvement in responding to overtourism and preserving local culture. Among residents, 68% reported participating in heritage preservation activities, including traditional crafts, festivals, and cultural education. In addition, 54% of households adapted tourism-related business models to incorporate cultural elements, such as combining homestays with culinary experiences or craft demonstrations.

From the tourist perspective, 72% expressed appreciation for community involvement in protecting local living spaces and cultural identity. However, only 41% of young residents reported regular participation in cultural activities, indicating limited engagement among younger generations.

Observations during festivals also revealed increasing formalisation and performance-oriented adaptations of cultural events, alongside continued efforts by community members to maintain traditional practices.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

The study findings indicate that overtourism in Hoi An has exerted severe pressures not only on urban infrastructure and the living environment of the local community but also directly on the preservation of cultural identity. The commercialisation of handicraft products, the performative adaptation of customs, and the homogenisation of cultural spaces have collectively undermined heritage's authenticity and intrinsic value (Cohen, 1988; Richards, 2018). These results are entirely consistent with studies conducted in Venice, Barcelona, and Lijiang, where overtourism led to commoditisation and erosion of local cultural identity (Capocchi et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2018).

However, Hoi An presents a distinctive case: Despite substantial pressure from tourists and commercial demands, the local community remains pivotal in preserving and recreating cultural value. This finding supports the "community-based tourism" perspective (Murphy, 1985) and aligns with research on sustainable tourism governance, emphasising the necessity of multi-stakeholder management and active community participation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Chaney, 2023). The tension between short-term economic gains and long-term conservation in Hoi An reflects a common challenge faced by global heritage destinations (Butler, 1999; Mazzamuto, 2022; Timothy, 2007). Consequently, responsible tourism management, coupled with appropriate regulatory policies, is essential for maintaining a balance between economic development and the preservation of cultural identity (Smith, 2019).

The Hoi An case provides empirical evidence of the impacts of overtourism on cultural identity while extending existing theoretical frameworks, which have primarily been developed from European tourism cities such as Venice and Barcelona (Capocchi et al., 2019; Mazzamuto, 2022). It illustrates the need to adapt overtourism theory to the context of developing countries, where governance structures and socio-economic characteristics differ substantially (Chaney, 2023).

This study's notable contribution is clarifying the community's proactive role in responding to overtourism. Contrary to the common assumption that communities are passive agents, findings from Hoi An show that residents actively select and restructure cultural identity in adaptive ways. This suggests incorporating the concept of "cultural resilience" as an intermediary variable in analysing the relationship between overtourism and cultural sustainability (Richards, 2018; Su et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the study developed and tested a quantitative index to assess cultural impacts in the specific context of Hoi An. This provides a crucial basis for quantifying cultural change and offers a standardised tool for international comparison and generalisation, strengthening the theoretical foundation regarding the relationship between overtourism and sustainable cultural development (Smith, 2019; UNWTO, 2018).

From an applied perspective, the results indicate the need to implement a monitoring system based on the cultural impact index to regularly track the effects of overtourism, thereby supporting decisions on visitor volume control, spatial and temporal distribution, and reducing pressure on the ancient town (Capocchi et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018).

The findings also reaffirm the central role of the local community in preserving and redefining cultural identity. Tourism policies should therefore enhance community participation in planning, exploitation, and heritage conservation, improving social acceptance while leveraging local resources for sustainable development (Chaney, 2023; Murphy, 1985).

Finally, the research suggests that Hoi An needs to reshape its tourism communication strategy and product offerings to balance experiential value with cultural authenticity. Achieving this requires coordinated efforts among authorities, businesses, and the community to develop a model of responsible and adaptive tourism governance capable of addressing the challenges posed by overtourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Mazzamuto, 2022; Richards, 2018).

This study contributes theoretically by introducing cultural resilience as a mediating concept between overtourism and cultural sustainability in living heritage destinations. Unlike deterministic models that portray communities as passive victims, the Hoi An case demonstrates adaptive agency and selective cultural reproduction.

Policy Implications

International experiences, such as visitor-limitation mechanisms in Venice or tourism zoning policies in Kyoto, demonstrate that effective management of overtourism is feasible only when a clear legal framework and genuine community participation support it. In the context of Hoi An, rather than mechanically applying European models, a flexible approach that builds on the proactive role of local residents in preserving cultural identity and co-creating tourism products is more suitable for Vietnam's socio-economic conditions, while still ensuring alignment with international heritage governance standards.

Based on the research findings, several key policy implications can be drawn. First, authorities should implement

visitor flow management mechanisms using tools such as timed-entry tickets or tourism quotas to alleviate pressure on the ancient town (UNWTO, 2018). Second, the preservation of cultural identity must be grounded in community participation by encouraging artisans, homestay owners, and small business operators to co-create tourism products, thereby enhancing authenticity and social cohesion (Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2021). Third, regulations should be established to control the commercialisation of heritage, particularly regarding festivals and urban architecture, to limit excessive "staging" (Richards, 2018). In addition, promoting green tourism and circular economy models, such as waste management, energy conservation, and the reuse of cultural resources, will contribute to reinforcing long-term sustainability (Su et al., 2020). Finally, Hoi An needs to develop a sustainable tourism strategy integrated with heritage governance, while expanding international cooperation to learn from successful models in other heritage cities (Butler, 1999; Timothy, 2007). These policy implications are relevant to Hoi An and can also be applied to other heritage destinations facing similar challenges in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

The study on overtourism and the erosion of cultural identity in Hoi An Ancient Town has highlighted the dual relationship between tourism development and cultural preservation. On one hand, the significant increase in visitor numbers in recent years has contributed to economic growth, job creation, and the enhancement of Hoi An's profile on the international tourism map (UNWTO, 2018). On the other hand, the pressures of overtourism have generated serious consequences for infrastructure and urban spaces, leading to the commercialisation, simplification, and distortion of many traditional cultural values (Cohen, 1988; Richards, 2018).

The findings show that Hoi An's cultural identity is simultaneously reinforced through conservation activities and threatened by erosion, as many cultural practices lose their authenticity. An important implication of the study is the affirmation of the central role of the local community in responding to and preserving cultural heritage under tourism pressure. The community is not merely a passive recipient of tourism impacts but also a creative agent, maintaining and transmitting local cultural values (Murphy, 1985; Timothy, 2007). However, coordination among the community, authorities, and businesses remains insufficiently effective, requiring mechanisms for empowerment, equitable benefit distribution, and improved tourism governance to maximise the community's potential in safeguarding cultural identity (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

This study contributes to both theoretical and practical foundations for sustainable destination management, emphasising the importance of controlling visitor loads, developing tourism products linked to authentic cultural values, and enhancing community participation mechanisms (Butler, 1999; Su et al., 2020). A novel aspect of the research is that it not only analyses the conflict between tourism development and heritage preservation but also highlights the proactive and creative role of the community in maintaining

identity—a perspective that has been underexplored in previous studies (Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2021).

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations regarding the scope of the survey and does not deeply analyse the role of economic and policy factors in the process of identity transformation. Therefore, future research should expand comparisons with other domestic and international destinations and conduct a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between tourism development policies, heritage governance, and changes in cultural identity in the context of globalisation (Richards, 2018). Such efforts will help develop tourism management models that both meet economic development needs and protect cultural values sustainably for future generations.

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AI statement: The authors stated that there is no use of Generative AI or AI-based tools in this study.

Declaration of interest: The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data sharing statement: Data supporting the findings and conclusions are available upon request from corresponding author.

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