THE TRANSFORMATION OF "MELUKAT" IN CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL TOURISM: A NETNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the symbolic transformation of the Balinese purification ritual "Melukat" within the context of spiritual tourism and digital media. Using a netnographic approach, TikTok videos were analysed to understand how tourists interpret and engage with this ritual. Findings show that tourists often reframe "Melukat" as a healing or emotional experience, detached from its original Hindu-Balinese religious context. Social media plays a key role in shaping these perceptions, emphasizing aesthetic appeal and personal wellness narratives. This phenomenon raises questions about authenticity, commodification, and the evolving meaning of spiritual practices in a digital age.

Keywords: melukat, spiritual tourism, tiktok, healing, ritual

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, spiritual tourism has emerged as a growing trend among traveller's seeking deeper emotional, psychological, or spiritual fulfilment through cultural and religious experiences. Bali, with its rich cultural heritage and strong spiritual traditions, has become a prime destination for such pursuits. One ritual that has increasingly gained attention from both local and international traveller's is "Melukat", a traditional Balinese purification ceremony believed to cleanse the body and soul of negative energy.

While "Melukat" has long been practiced by the Balinese people as a sacred and symbolic ritual rooted in Hindu belief systems, its meaning has been transformed in the context of modern tourism. Travelers often become familiar with "Melukat" not through traditional cultural education, but through curated content on social media especially visual platforms like TikTok. In this digital space, "Melukat" is presented not only as a spiritual act, but also as a visually engaging and emotionally evocative experience, often out from its original religious context.

This phenomenon raises important questions about how traveller's interpret and interact with local spiritual practices in a digitalized world. What meanings do traveller's attach to "Melukat"? How does social media, especially TikTok, shape their perceptions and motivations? To answer these questions, this study uses a netnographic approach to explore tourists' understandings of "Melukat" as expressed through interactions on social media.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on the intersection of spirituality, tourism, and digital media by highlighting how cultural practices are reinterpreted, commodified, or even appropriated in global tourism narratives. It also provides insight into the dynamics of meaning-making in spiritual tourism, where authenticity, identity, and experience are continuously negotiated through digital platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformation of Melukat in Bali's Spiritual Tourism

"Melukat" is a spiritual cleansing ceremony for the mind and soul in humans and this ceremony is carried out from generation to generation by Hindus until now (Dharmika, 2017). "Melukat"comes from the word sulukat, su which means good and lukat which means purification and this ceremony is led by traditional leaders (Subagia et al 2020). "Melukat" is usually included in a half day tour package, then proceed with other activities such as visiting temples and enjoying the natural scenery. According to Mahardika (2018) "Melukat" can be seen from two sides, the first is religious activities for Hindus and the second is spiritual tourism that anyone can do. In fact, recently, visitors who spend their holidays in Bali are not only on the beach, such as Kuta Beach which is famous for the 3 S (sea, sand, and sun) for swimming or surfing, and sun bathing as well as the night clubbing. However, the existence of other places of interest, one of them is "Melukat" the purification ritual including spiritual tourism in the isle of God.

Nowadays, the "Melukat" tradition seems to be loved by many people, including celebrities. There are several national actresses and artists from the capital city of Jakarta, starting from Pevita Pearce, Jessica Iskandar, Nikita Willy, Cinta Laura Kiehl, Valerie Thomas, even Raline Shah was seen sharing their experience of wounding through her social media accounts. "Melukat" itself is one of the religious traditions of Hindus in Bali, which is one of the series in the Tirtayatra ritual (Rifa'i & Kamaludin, 2021). In the process of "Melukat", a series of rituals of praying, meditating, or taking water (holy water) are carried out (Budiasih, 2017). The main purpose of this tradition is to cleanse the soul from negative things, such as anxiety, nightmares, illness, and so on (Suatama, 2021). Even though this tradition is a religious activity of Hindus, Hindu priests do not forbid anyone who wants to take part in the "Melukat"ritual (Muliadiasa et al, 2022). It is not surprising that the popularity of this tradition has increased because it is open to anyone. Apart from that, influencers such as Indonesian artists also actively share their experiences when painting through social media so that their followers also become curious and try it. This "Melukat" activity is indeed suitable for those who want to take a break from the hustle and bustle of the city for refreshing and healing.

Social Media's Role in Shaping Tourist Perceptions

The evolution of the travel industry in the digital age has seen a transformative shift in promotional strategies, prominently marked by the rise of social media influencers. Influencers, defined by their ability to shape perceptions and influence consumer behavior, have become instrumental in the dissemination of travel-related content across various platforms. Existing literature acknowledges the profound impact of influencers on destination choices and highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in the context of tourism marketing (Pop et al., 2022). Understanding the travel preferences of different generational cohorts is crucial for developing effective destination marketing strategies. Prior studies have explored how millennials, Generation X, and baby boomers exhibit distinct preferences in terms of travel motivations, activities, and desired experiences. Recognizing these variations provides a foundation for comprehending how social media influencers may resonate differently with each generation, influencing their perceptions of tourist destinations (Patterson et al., 2017). Several studies have examined the content produced by influencers and its influence on audience perceptions. Visual storytelling, personal narratives, and the aspirational lifestyle depicted by influencers contribute to the creation of destination imagery. However, limited research has systematically explored how these content strategies intersect with the diverse expectations and interests of various age groups, leaving a critical gap in understanding the nuanced impact of influencer content on destination perceptions (Li & Feng, 2022). The effectiveness of influencer marketing relies heavily on audience engagement and the establishment of trust between influencers and their followers. Research has explored factors influencing engagement, including authenticity, relatability,

and perceived expertise. Examining how these factors vary across generations is essential for comprehending the differential impact of influencer-driven content on destination perceptions (Pop et al., 2022).

Platforms like TikTok have emerged as powerful tools in shaping how spiritual experiences are represented and consumed. Visual narratives of *"Melukat"* often emphasize emotional or aesthetic appeal, which can distort its original religious significance. Tourists, particularly millennials, are drawn to participate in such rituals due to social media trends and the phenomenon known as FoMO (Fear of Missing Out). This shift from traditional learning to social media influence has been noted to reduce spiritual depth and encourage superficial engagement with sacred practices.

Commodification and Authenticity Challenges

The concept of authenticity in tourism, first introduced by MacCannell at 1973, has evolved significantly over time. While tourists initially sought genuine "backstage" experiences, the commercialization of culture has led to the creation of "staged authenticity," blurring the lines between real and performed experiences. Scholars differ in their views: some believe staged authenticity is ethical and beneficial, while others argue it dilutes cultural value. Modern tourists often pursue *existential authenticity* a personal and emotional connection rather than objective truth.

Commodification of culture in tourism brings both benefits and challenges. On one hand, it generates income, employment, and development, especially in developing countries. On the other, it risks misrepresentation, loss of cultural meaning, and detachment from heritage. Postmodern perspectives suggest that true authenticity may not exist, and that cultural products adapted for tourism can still hold value in contemporary contexts. Ultimately, the perception of authenticity is subjective, shaped by individual attitudes and cultural expectations, and continues to influence tourist satisfaction, place attachment, and destination loyalty.

Defining authenticity and authentic experience is a complex process. The actual meaning of authenticity is 'original' however, there are different interpretations based on various perspectives such as objectivism, constructivism, and post-modernism. Under the current changing and globalizing environment, cultural boundaries are weakening and traditions lose their core form. Power and politics play important role in heritage preservation and authorization of the authentic experience. The search for authentic experience has become one of the main drives for people to travel. The increase in the demand for authentic products and experiences has resulted in the commodification of cultural elements. On the other hand, cultural tourism not only creates jobs for local people but also led them to embrace their culture.

Globalization, capitalism, standardization, and social media are some examples of variables influencing authentic expertise within the context of tourism. Future research should consider such

variables. The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding of the role of authenticity in touristic experience by reviewing the relevant literature.

METHOD, DATA, AND ANALYSIS

This study uses a netnography approach, a qualitative research method adapted from ethnography to study online communities and digital interactions. Netnography allows for in-depth exploration of cultural practices and meaning-making as they occur in virtual environments (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2023). This method is particularly relevant to understanding how tourists engage with and interpret the "Melukat" ritual through platforms such as TikTok, where cultural narratives are created and shared by users.

Netnography involves observing, collecting, and analyzing user-generated content such as videos, comments, hashtags, and captions to uncover patterns, themes, and cultural meanings. By highlighting how "Melukat" is performed and discussed in the digital realm, this study aims to explore the symbolic transformation of a traditional religious ritual into a tourism and digital phenomenon (Tussyadiah & Zach, 2023).

Data Collection

The data were collected from TikTok, a popular video-sharing platform widely used for sharing personal experiences, lifestyle content, and cultural practices. The researcher conducted keyword searches using terms such as *"Melukat"*, *"Melukat Bali*, and *ritual pembersihan diri*, and identified TikTok videos that explicitly depict or describe the "Melukat" ritual.
Content selected for analysis includes Video recordings of tourists participating in or observing *"Melukat"*, Captions accompanying the videos, Comments and interactions from viewers, Hashtags used to contextualize the ritual

The selected content provides insights into how users frame the ritual, the emotions or spiritual meanings they express, and how their narratives differ from or align with the traditional Balinese understanding of *"Melukat"*.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, with the following stages 1. Data Familiarization: Watching videos and reading captions and comments repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding. 2. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes such as "spiritual purification," "emotional healing," "cultural curiosity,". 3. Interpretation: Interpreting these themes in relation to theoretical frameworks on spiritual tourism, authenticity, and digital media.

Through this analysis, this study reveals how "Melukat" is transformed into a symbolic and performative experience in digital tourism culture, shaped by social media algorithms, aesthetic preferences, and global wellness trends.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Tourists' Interpretation of *"Melukat"*

Analysis of TikTok content reveals that many tourists view "Melukat" not as a religious or spiritual ritual per se, but as an emotionally uplifting and cleansing experience. Words such as "healing," "peaceful," "refreshing," and "releasing negative energy" frequently appear in video captions and narratives. This suggests that the ritual is often interpreted through the lens of personal wellness, rather than its original Hindu-Balinese religious meaning.

Such interpretations indicate a symbolic transformation of "Melukat" from a sacred purification ceremony to a spiritual commodity consumed for self-care or emotional well-being. Tourists tend to appropriate the ritual as a personal journey, rather than as an act of devotion rooted in Balinese cosmology.

Role of TikTok in Shaping Perception

TikTok plays a central role in shaping how "Melukat" is represented and understood. Many videos highlight aesthetic elements such as temple views, flowing water, soothing background music, and slow-motion effects that enhance the visual and emotional appeal of the ritual. Hashtags such as #melukat, #healingjourney, and #balinesespiritualexperience contribute to the construction of "Melukat" as a trending spiritual activity.

This mode of representation aligns with the concept of "experiential tourism," where the focus is on emotional satisfaction and sharing on social media. However, it also raises concerns about superficiality and loss of depth of context. The ritual becomes part of a curated online persona rather than a respectful engagement with local belief systems.

Negotiation of Authenticity

Tourist comments reflect a constant negotiation between the search for authenticity and the desire for a meaningful experience. Some users express a sense of wonder or gratitude, indicating a certain level of spiritual engagement. However, many also view "Melukat" solely as a unique moment to be captured in

a photo or video, indicating a commodified form of engagement. The tension between spiritual sincerity and performative aspects is evident in this phenomenon.

In addition, several Balinese TikTok users or local guides have attempted to re-contextualize "Melukat" by explaining the ritual's cultural roots through comments or video captions. This suggests an ongoing digital dialogue between local communities and tourists regarding the proper interpretation of this sacred ritual.

Implications for Balinese Cultural Preservation

While the digital exposure of "Melukat" contributes to tourism promotion and cultural visibility, it also poses risks of misinterpretation, cultural dilution, and commodification. The ritual may lose its depth when reduced to a consumable visual experience. At the same time, this digital engagement provides an opportunity for cultural education if managed thoughtfully by local stakeholders.

The findings suggest that while "Melukat" is gaining popularity as a spiritual experience among tourists, its meaning is being reshaped in the digital age. The role of social media in tourism is no longer just promotional it is also interpretative and transformative.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals how the traditional Balinese purification ritual, "Melukat," has undergone a transformation in meaning as it has entered the realm of digital tourism. Through a netnographic analysis of TikTok content, it is apparent that many tourists no longer engage in "Melukat" solely as a religious or spiritual act rooted in Balinese Hinduism, but rather as a symbolic experience for emotional healing, self-reflection, and personal well-being.

Social media, especially TikTok, plays a significant role in reframing "Melukat" as a visually appealing and emotionally evocative activity, often detached from its original cultural and religious context. While this digital exposure helps promote Balinese culture to a wider audience, it also carries the risk of commodification and misrepresentation.

Tourists' perceptions of authenticity are shaped by personal experiences as well as narratives on social media, creating a complex relationship between genuine spiritual engagement and performative tourism. This study emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and the need for local stakeholders to actively engage in digital discourses to preserve the sacred meaning of rituals such as "Melukat."

IMPLICATION/LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study contributes to the growing literature on the intersection of spiritual tourism, cultural commodification, and digital media. The findings of this study offer several implications for Tourism

Stakeholders: The transformation of "Melukat" into a digital spiritual experience highlights the need for cultural preservation strategies. Tourism authorities and local communities should work together to provide accurate and contextual cultural information, to ensure that spiritual rituals are presented respectfully and authentically. For Cultural Practitioners: Balinese religious and cultural figures may consider engaging actively on digital platforms to educate audiences and clear up misconceptions, thereby reclaiming narrative control over sacred traditions. For Tourism Educators and Researchers: This study supports the importance of incorporating digital media literacy and cultural sensitivity into tourism education. Understanding how tourists consume and interpret spiritual practices online is critical to the development of responsible tourism models.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged for Focus on One Platform: Data was collected only from TikTok, which may not fully represent the spectrum of digital narratives about "Melukat" on other platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or blogs. No Tourist Interviews: The analysis relies solely on public online content without direct interviews with tourists. Therefore, interpretations are based on digital expressions that may not fully reflect tourists' experiences or intentions. Contextual Ambiguity: Some videos do not provide clear enough context, making it difficult to assess the extent of spiritual understanding or the role of local guides in shaping the experience.

Suggestions for Further Research for Expand Platform Coverage: Further research could include other social media platforms to gain a more comprehensive picture of how "Melukat" is represented and interpreted online. Engage In-depth Interviews: Conducting interviews with both tourists and local cultural practitioners will enrich our understanding of the motivations, perceptions, and negotiation of meanings surrounding this ritual. Explore Local Perspectives: Further studies should explore how local communities view the spread and digital transformation of "Melukat," and whether this is considered a form of cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation. Review Long-Term Impacts: It would be useful to examine how the increasing popularity of "Melukat" on digital platforms has affected its traditional role and meaning in Balinese society over time.

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