



BMTP6003

**Paradise Consumed:
Reimagining Tourism in Bali in
the Age of Digital Desire**

Angelika Jasnos- 2308967

Lecturer: Jacqui Jones

Deadline: 26th April 2026



Angelika Jasnos

Paradise Consumed: Reimagining Tourism in Bali in the Age of Digital Desire

Tourism in the 21st century is increasingly defined by a tension between growth and sustainability, accessibility and authenticity. As Terry Stevens (2025) argues, tourism is no longer simply about transactions but about “creating meaningful immersive experiences” rooted in local culture and emotional connection. However, this shift is occurring alongside the rapid expansion of digital platforms that have transformed how destinations are imagined and consumed. The Indonesian Island of Bali exemplifies this contradiction. Once perceived as an idyllic and spiritual retreat, Bali has become one of the most visited destinations in the world, attracting approximately 6.3 million international tourists annually prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2023). While tourism has driven economic growth, it has also generated environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and increasing pressure on local communities. This raises a critical question: have digital platforms and destination strategies evolved from enabling tourism development into driving the over-tourism crisis?

The rapid growth of tourism in Bali can be understood through Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle model, which suggests that destinations evolve through stages of exploration, development, and eventual stagnation. Bali’s current trajectory reflects a mature destination experiencing the consequences of overdevelopment, including congestion, resource depletion, and declining authenticity (Wall, 2020). At the same time, Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) concept of the experience economy highlights a growing demand for immersive and meaningful travel experiences. Bali’s cultural practices, spiritual traditions, and natural landscapes position it as an ideal site for such experiences. However, as MacCannell (1976) argues, the pursuit of authenticity often results in its commodification, where cultural practices are adapted to meet tourist expectations rather than preserved in their original context.

This paradox has been intensified by the rise of digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which play a central role in shaping contemporary travel behaviour. The visual nature of these platforms promotes highly curated representations of Bali, reinforcing its image as a tropical paradise. As Urry (1990) suggests through the concept of the “tourist gaze,” destinations are consumed visually before they are physically experienced. In the digital age, this gaze is amplified algorithmically, directing millions of users toward the same locations. As a result, specific sites such as rice terraces, waterfalls, and temples have become overcrowded, reducing the quality of both visitor experience and local life.



Figure 1: Sunrise tourism activity at Mount Batur illustrating visitor concentration and the commercialisation of nature-based experiences (Author's own image, 2025)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the popularity of sunrise experiences at Mount Batur has resulted in large numbers of visitors arriving simultaneously, often through organised jeep tours. While the landscape offers a sense of wonder, the concentration of tourists reflects the growing commodification of natural environments. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept of the experience economy, where destinations are structured around staged and repeatable experiences rather than spontaneous engagement.



Figure 2: Rice terraces in Bali (Author's own image, 2025)

As illustrated in Figure 2, such landscapes are widely promoted through digital platforms, shaping perceptions of Bali as a serene and untouched destination. These idealised representations contribute to the construction of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990), encouraging visitors to seek out these visually iconic locations. However, the widespread circulation of such imagery can lead to increased visitor demand, often resulting in congestion and commercialisation that contrasts with the peaceful image presented online.

In addition to social media, platform-based economies have played a significant role in transforming Bali's tourism infrastructure. Accommodation platforms such as Airbnb and Booking.com have facilitated rapid expansion in tourist accommodation. While these platforms provide economic opportunities, they also contribute to unregulated development and land-use change. In Bali, agricultural land has increasingly been converted into private villas and resorts, contributing to water scarcity and environmental degradation (Cole, 2012). This aligns with Srnicek's (2017) concept of platform capitalism, where digital systems prioritise growth and engagement over sustainability.

The environmental consequences of tourism in Bali are particularly significant.



Figure 3: Accumulation of plastic waste in a coastal area of Bali highlighting environmental pressures associated with tourism (Author's own image, 2025)

As shown in Figure 3, plastic pollution has become a visible and persistent issue in coastal areas of Bali. The island generates approximately 3,800 tonnes of waste per day, a large proportion of which is linked to tourism consumption (UN Environment Programme, 2021). In addition to waste generation, excessive water use by hotels and villas has further strained local resources. These challenges highlight the

limitations of existing tourism models, which prioritise economic gain over environmental sustainability.

Beyond environmental concerns, tourism has also reshaped Balinese culture. Traditional ceremonies and rituals, which hold deep spiritual meaning, are increasingly performed for tourists, raising questions about authenticity and cultural integrity. Cohen (1988) argues that such commodification transforms culture into a product, potentially eroding its original significance. While tourism can support cultural preservation, it can also lead to its simplification and commercialisation.

Despite these challenges, it would be reductive to view digital platforms solely as perpetrators of over-tourism. As noted by Gretzel et al. (2015), technology also offers opportunities for more sustainable tourism management. Smart tourism systems can be used to monitor visitor flows, reduce congestion, and promote alternative destinations. Digital storytelling can enhance visitor understanding of local culture, encouraging more respectful and meaningful engagement. In this sense, the issue is not technology itself but how it is used.

Having visited Bali, the contrast between its representation and reality becomes particularly evident. While moments of genuine connection such as interactions with local communities or participation in cultural practices - highlight the potential for meaningful tourism, these experiences are often overshadowed by overcrowding and environmental strain. This reinforces Stevens' (2025) argument that the future of tourism lies in facilitating human connection rather than simply increasing access.

A Manifesto for 21st Century Tourism must therefore move beyond traditional models of growth and embrace a more holistic and regenerative approach. Tourism should prioritise quality over quantity, focusing on meaningful experiences rather than visitor numbers. Local communities must be placed at the centre of decision-making processes, ensuring that tourism development aligns with their needs and values. Environmental sustainability should evolve into environmental regeneration, where tourism actively contributes to the restoration of ecosystems. Digital platforms must also be reimagined, shifting from demand amplification to demand management, promoting responsible travel behaviour and diversifying visitor flows.

The intensification of tourism in Bali can also be understood through the concept of "over-tourism," which has gained increasing attention in academic literature over the past decade. Goodwin (2017) defines over-tourism as the situation in which the impact of tourism exceeds the physical, ecological, social, or psychological capacity of a destination. In Bali, this is evident not only in environmental degradation but also in the growing dissatisfaction among residents, many of whom experience tourism as an intrusive force rather than a source of benefit. This aligns with Doxey's (1975) Irridex model, which outlines how host communities move from initial euphoria toward irritation and eventual antagonism as tourism intensifies. Reports of local protests, concerns about inappropriate tourist behaviour, and increasing tensions suggest that parts of Bali may be entering this latter stage.

A further layer of analysis can be introduced through carrying capacity theory, which refers to the maximum number of visitors a destination can sustain without causing

unacceptable alteration to the environment or decline in visitor satisfaction (UNEP, 2019). Bali's infrastructure, particularly in areas such as Canggu and Ubud, is under significant strain, with traffic congestion, water shortages, and waste management challenges becoming increasingly visible. For example, water demand from tourism facilities has been estimated to exceed local supply in certain regions, contributing to declining groundwater levels and reduced access for local communities (Cole, 2012). This highlights a fundamental imbalance between tourism growth and resource management, raising questions about the long-term viability of current development models.

In addition to physical impacts, the role of neoliberal economic policies in shaping tourism development must be considered. Tourism in Bali has been largely driven by market-oriented strategies that prioritise investment, growth, and international competitiveness. This approach aligns with Harvey's (2005) critique of neoliberalism, which emphasises the commodification of resources and the prioritisation of profit over social equity. In the context of Bali, land, culture, and even spirituality has increasingly been incorporated into the tourism economy, often at the expense of local autonomy and environmental sustainability. The proliferation of luxury resorts and private villas illustrates how tourism development can exacerbate inequalities, with profits frequently concentrated among external investors rather than local communities.

The influence of digital platforms further complicates this dynamic by accelerating what has been termed the "attention economy." Platforms such as Instagram operate on algorithms that reward visibility, engagement, and shareability, often privileging visually striking content over contextual depth (Abidin, 2016). This has contributed to the emergence of "checklist tourism," where visitors seek to replicate specific images or experiences rather than engage meaningfully with a destination. In Bali, this is evident in the popularity of sites such as Lempuyang Temple, where visitors queue for extended periods to capture a single photograph. Such practices not only create congestion but also reduce cultural sites to backdrops for digital consumption.

This phenomenon can be further analysed through Debord's (1967) concept of the "society of the spectacle," in which social relations are mediated through images. Tourism, in this sense, becomes less about experiencing a place and more about producing and sharing representations of that experience. Bali's transformation into a global "brand" reflects this shift, where its identity is shaped as much by online imagery as by its lived reality. This raises important questions about authenticity and the extent to which destinations can retain their cultural integrity in the face of global digital exposure.

At the same time, the role of government policy and governance structures in shaping tourism outcomes cannot be overlooked. While the Indonesian government has introduced initiatives aimed at promoting "quality tourism," implementation remains inconsistent. For instance, proposals to limit visitor numbers or introduce stricter regulations on accommodation development have faced resistance from industry stakeholders concerned about economic impacts. This reflects a broader

tension between short-term economic gains and long-term sustainability, a challenge faced by many global destinations experiencing rapid tourism growth.

Comparative examples from other destinations further illustrate the complexity of managing over-tourism. In Barcelona, authorities have introduced strict regulations on short-term rentals and implemented measures to disperse tourists across different areas of the city. Similarly, Venice has introduced visitor caps and entry fee systems to manage tourist flows. These examples demonstrate that while policy interventions can mitigate some impacts, they are often reactive and may not address the underlying drivers of tourism demand, particularly those linked to digital platforms.

In contrast, emerging concepts such as regenerative tourism offer a more transformative approach. Unlike sustainable tourism, which seeks to minimise negative impacts, regenerative tourism aims to actively improve the social and environmental conditions of a destination (Dredge, 2022). In Bali, this could involve initiatives such as community-led tourism projects, investment in renewable energy, and programmes that support cultural preservation. For example, locally managed eco-tourism ventures have demonstrated the potential to provide economic benefits while maintaining environmental and cultural integrity. However, scaling such initiatives requires significant structural change and collaboration between stakeholders.

The integration of smart tourism technologies also presents opportunities for more effective destination management. Data analytics can be used to monitor visitor flows, predict peak periods, and implement dynamic pricing strategies to encourage off-peak travel (Gretzel et al., 2015). Mobile applications can provide real-time information to tourists, guiding them toward less crowded locations and promoting more responsible behaviour. However, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on their implementation and the willingness of both tourists and industry stakeholders to engage with them.

Another critical dimension to consider is the role of tourist behaviour and responsibility. While much of the discussion around over-tourism focuses on supply-side factors such as infrastructure and policy, demand-side factors are equally important. Tourists themselves play a role in shaping the impacts of tourism through their choices and behaviours. Concepts such as “responsible tourism” and “ethical consumption” emphasise the need for travellers to consider the social and environmental consequences of their actions (Goodwin, 2017). In Bali, this could involve choosing locally owned accommodation, reducing plastic use, and respecting cultural norms. However, influencing tourist behaviour remains challenging, particularly in a context where digital platforms prioritise convenience and instant gratification.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique lens through which to reassess tourism in Bali. The sudden halt of international travel led to a dramatic decline in visitor numbers, resulting in significant economic hardship for communities that depend heavily on tourism. However, it also provided an opportunity to reflect on the sustainability of the existing tourism model. During this period, there were reports of

environmental recovery, including cleaner beaches and reduced congestion. This temporary reset highlighted both the benefits and vulnerabilities of tourism, reinforcing the need for a more resilient and diversified economic structure.

A further critical perspective can be developed through the concept of cultural sustainability, which emphasises the preservation of intangible heritage, traditions, and local identity in the face of globalisation (UNESCO, 2019). In Bali, culture is not only a lived experience but also a central component of its tourism appeal. However, the increasing commodification of rituals, dances, and spiritual practices raises concerns about the long-term integrity of Balinese culture. As tourism demand grows, there is a risk that cultural expressions become standardised and adapted primarily for visitor consumption, rather than maintained for their original social and religious significance. This reflects broader debates within tourism studies حول the tension between cultural preservation and economic development.

The role of governance and stakeholder collaboration is therefore crucial in addressing these challenges. Effective tourism management requires coordination between government authorities, local communities, private sector stakeholders, and tourists themselves. Bramwell and Lane (2011) argue that sustainable tourism depends on participatory governance, where local voices are actively included in decision-making processes. In Bali, however, power imbalances can limit the influence of local communities, particularly in areas where large-scale tourism investments dominate. Strengthening community participation is essential not only for ensuring equitable distribution of benefits but also for maintaining the authenticity and resilience of the destination.

Furthermore, the concept of “slow tourism” offers an alternative model that aligns closely with the principles of a 21st-century tourism manifesto. Slow tourism encourages longer stays, deeper engagement with local culture, and reduced environmental impact (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010). In contrast to the fast-paced, checklist-driven experiences promoted by digital platforms, slow tourism prioritises quality over quantity and fosters meaningful connections between visitors and host communities. In Bali, this could involve promoting rural tourism, cultural immersion programmes, and locally guided experiences that distribute economic benefits more evenly across the island.

Education and awareness also play a vital role in shaping the future of tourism. Tourists are not merely passive consumers but active participants whose behaviours influence destination outcomes. Initiatives that educate visitors about environmental issues, cultural norms, and responsible travel practices can contribute to more sustainable tourism patterns. Digital platforms, while often criticised for driving over-tourism, could be repurposed to support such initiatives by promoting ethical travel narratives and highlighting lesser-known destinations.

Ultimately, the future of tourism in Bali depends on a shift in mindset among all stakeholders. Moving away from a growth-oriented model toward a value-driven approach requires rethinking the purpose of tourism itself. Rather than viewing tourism as an end in itself, it should be understood as a means of fostering cultural

exchange, environmental stewardship, and community wellbeing. This shift is central to the development of a meaningful and effective Manifesto for 21st Century Tourism.

In conclusion, Bali illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of tourism in the digital age. While digital platforms and destination strategies have contributed to over-tourism, they also hold the potential to support more sustainable and meaningful forms of travel. The future of tourism depends on a fundamental shift in values—from consumption to connection, from growth to sustainability, and from passive observation to active engagement. As Stevens (2025) suggests, this transformation is not a singular moment but an ongoing movement. For Bali and other global destinations, embracing this movement is essential to ensuring that tourism remains a force for both cultural enrichment and environmental preservation.

References:

- Abidin, C. (2016) 'Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram', *Media International Australia*, 161(1), pp. 86–100. Available at: [Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram - the UWA Profiles and Research Repository](#) (Accessed on: 29.03.2026)
- Bramwell, B. and Lane, B. (2011) 'Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), pp. 411–421. Available at: [Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability: Journal of Sustainable Tourism: Vol 19 , No 4-5 - Get Access](#) (Accessed on: 29.03.2026)
- Butler, R. (1980) 'The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources', *Canadian Geographer*, 24(1), pp. 5–12. Available at: [\(PDF\) The Concept of A Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources](#) (Accessed on: 11.04.2026)
- Cohen, E. (1988) 'Authenticity and commoditization in tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), pp. 371–386. Available at: [Authenticity and commoditization in tourism - ScienceDirect](#) (Accessed on: 08.04.2026)
- Cole, S. (2012) 'A political ecology of water equity and tourism: A case study from Bali', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), pp. 1221–1241. Available at: [\(99+\) A political ecology of water equity and tourism](#) (Accessed on: 07.04.2026)
- Debord, G. (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel.
- Dickinson, J.E. and Lumsdon, L.M. (2010) *Slow Travel and Tourism*. London: Earthscan.
- Doxey, G.V. (1975) 'A causation theory of visitor–resident irritants: Methodology and research inferences', in *Proceedings of the Travel Research Association Conference*. San Diego, pp. 195–198. Available at: [Doxey, G.V. \(1975\) A Causation Theory of Visitor-Resident Irritants Methodology and Research Inferences. 6th Annual Conference Proceedings of the Travel Research Association, San Diego, 8-11 September 1975, 195-198. - References - Scientific Research Publishing](#) (Accessed on: 15.04.2026)
- Dredge, D. (2022) 'Regenerative tourism: Transforming mindsets and systems', *Journal of Tourism Future*, 8 (3): 269–281. Available at: [Regenerative tourism: transforming mindsets, systems and practices | Journal of Tourism Futures | Emerald Publishing](#) (Accessed on: 11.04.2026)
- Goodwin, H. (2017) *The Challenge of Overtourism*. Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers.
- Gretzel, U., Sigala, M., Xiang, Z. and Koo, C. (2015) 'Smart tourism: Foundations and developments', *Electronic Markets*, 25(3), pp. 179–188. Available at: [\(PDF\) Smart tourism: foundations and developments](#) (Accessed on: 15.04.2026)
- Guttentag, D. (2013) 'Airbnb: Disruptive innovation and the rise of an informal tourism accommodation sector', *Current Issues in Tourism*, 18(12), pp. 1192–1217. Available at: [Airbnb: disruptive innovation and the rise of an informal tourism accommodation sector: Current Issues in Tourism: Vol 18 , No 12 - Get Access](#) (Accessed on: 16.04.2026)

- Hall, C.M., Scott, D. and Gössling, S. (2020) 'Pandemics, transformations and tourism: Be careful what you wish for', *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), pp. 577–598.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacCannell, D. (1976) *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Mkono, M. (2016) 'Instagram and tourist behaviour: The case of wildlife tourism', *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 20, pp. 55–63.
- Nieuwland, S. and van Melik, R. (2018) 'Regulating Airbnb: How cities deal with perceived negative externalities of short-term rentals', *Environment and Planning A*, 52(6), pp. 1239–1258. Available at: [Full article: Regulating Airbnb: how cities deal with perceived negative externalities of short-term rentals](#) (Accessed on: 11.04.2026)
- Pine, B.J. and Gilmore, J.H. (1999) *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Srnicek, N. (2017) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stevens, T. (2025) *The Spark and a Sense of Wonder*. Wales: Graffeg.
- UN Environment Programme (2021) *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. Nairobi: UNEP.
- UNESCO (2019) *Culture for Sustainable Development*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNEP (2019) *Carrying Capacity and Sustainable Tourism Guidelines*. Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme.
- UNWTO (2023) *Tourism and Sustainability Report*. Madrid: World Tourism Organization. Available at: [UNWTO report on international tourism performance | EU Tourism Platform](#) (Accessed on: 14.04.2026)
- Urry, J. (1990) *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.
- Wall, G. (2020) *Tourism and Sustainability: Development, Globalisation and New Tourism in the Third World*. London: Routledge.