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Sustainable and Inclusive Spiritual Tourism Development in Bali as a Long-term Post-Pandemic Strategy

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused devastating socio-economic impacts in tourism destinations around the world. Many governments and tourism authorities could use the pandemic to seek more sustainable tourism development futures; for example, pre-pandemic Bali's 'tourism boom' barely benefited local people and local businesses because of economic leakage and 'tourist bubbles'. With an increasing demand on spiritual travel in the post pandemic period, Bali is seeking new opportunities as a spiritual tourism destination. This opportunity is based on their rich cultural and natural resources, and living heritage that can be related to spiritual tourism activities. This spiritual tourism development can contribute to local communities by creating sustainable livelihoods and providing diverse income sources as well as helping revitalise the local spiritual culture. However, tourism activities should be connected to, involve and empower local people and communities. Beyond the luxury yoga resort developments, governments, tourism authorities and large businesses should invest in supporting small-scale spiritual tourism businesses, so as to build more sustainable and inclusive spiritual tourism futures. This type of development would serve evolving tourist interests, as greater numbers of tourists prefer small-scale, community-based and cultural experiences, prefer to travel to remote and rural areas, and like to engage in spiritual practices and activities for their psychological recovery. Therefore, any post COVID-19 tourism recovery strategy must focus on the poorest communities in rural Bali where poverty rates accelerated during the pandemic. Authorities in Bali and similar destinations should support more opportunities for the poor and offer investment, education, and appropriate training programmes to reduce poverty and develop sustainable communities.

Key Words: COVID-19, spiritual tourism, sustainable tourism, Bali, Indonesia, Southeast Asia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns hit hard in every corner of the world. They hit tourist dependent economies hardest, especially in developing regions that are highly reliant on the tourism industry. The pandemic showed how fragile the tourism industry can be, and caused devastating socio-economic impacts, many of which are linked to previously existing structural issues (Adams *et al.,* 2020). These include a lack of job protection for informal and migrant workers, a lack of systematic support from governments and structural inequalities, etc. While most destinations in Southeast Asia reopened during 2022, COVID-19 recovery in the hardest-hit sectors could take more than 5 years. The region is recovering slowly compared to developed Western countries due to high flight costs, perceived safety, a lack of investment, and various other factors such as the Ukraine war and restrictions on outbound Chinese tourists (O' Regan, 2022).

Recording the highest number of Coronavirus cases in Southeast Asia (FMTNews, 2020), Indonesia experienced devastating economic impacts, with the tourism sector particularly hit (Wibawa, 2020). Tourism employs 10.28% of Indonesia's total workforce, which is 13 million workers (Kemenpar, 2020). Bali, where over 70% of economic activities are related to travel and tourism businesses (BPSBali, 2020b), recorded an almost 100% decline of foreign tourist arrivals in 2020, compared to 2019 (BPSBali, 2020a). This led to significant job and income losses (Soeriaatmadja, 2020)

and poverty acceleration among vulnerable populations (Neilsen, 2020). During the pandemic, the number of 'poor people' in Bali rose by 23.27% from 2019 to 2021 (BPSBali, 2022a). 'Poor people' is defined by the Indonesian government as those who cannot afford to meet their basic needs, such as food (BPSBali, 2022a).

Whilst recognising negative socio-economic impacts, scholars point out that the pandemic can act as a positive turning point (e.g. Mostafanezhad, 2020) for destinations, given that crises often lead to as a push for transformation and a 'new' normal (e.g. Barrios, 2017; Sahlins, 2017). Taking the pause as an opportunity, these scholars argue that destinations and tourism authorities / organisations should reflect on previously existing problems and 'build forward together' by reorienting their primary focus to more sustainable, inclusive and resilient directions (Wayne & Russell, 2022). For example, before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism activities and economic benefits were concentrated in urban locations in Southeast Asia such as Bangkok (Adams *et al*., 2021) while the majority of rural regions remained poor. During the pandemic, rural areas have seen new opportunities (Westcott & Wang, 2021) because of increasing tourist demand for quiet and remote places, where social distancing is easier (Kinsman, 2020; Stankov *et al*., 2020). Tourists have also been increasingly drawn to experiential tourism in small rural communities where they can live like locals. For psychological and physical recovery from the pandemic stress, individuals have been increasingly engaging in spiritual practices (Choe, 2020; Parker-Magyar, 2020; Whitby, 2020), and healing with nature (Choe & Bailey, 2022). Reflecting this emerging demand, the Tourism Association of Thailand (TAT) created a large fund for rural tourism development to support rural economies, with the objective of helping preserve cultural and natural resources through tourism (PattayaMail, 2020). The TAT also launched a new spiritual travel programme entitled, 'WAT: Worship Activities Tradition' that highlights 15 sacred sites along spiritual routes in rural Thailand (TAT, 2021) to revitalise spiritual heritage and help diversify tourism destinations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, spiritual aspects of tourism, such as its ability to foster resilience, received more attention among tourism scholars (Stankov *et al*., 2020). Spiritual tourism destinations such as Bali, Indonesia can capture this emerging demand for spiritual activities, as a post-pandemic economic recovery strategy and a means to diversify inbound tourism. In this conceptual paper, we explore Bali's spiritual tourism development as a sustainable post-pandemic recovery strategy. We argue such development should be undertaken in a sustainable and inclusive direction, reflecting existing structural problems and pre-pandemic inequalities, so as to benefit broader communities.

Prior to the pandemic, Bali was popular as an international spiritual tourism destination due to the book '*Eat Pray Love*' (Gilbert, 2007) and the movie effect of the related film. Since 2010, many spiritual tourism related businesses launched, with the sector becoming overly commercialised. This led to 'tourist bubbles' (MacRae, 2016), which are characterised by a high level of economic leakage. We argue that spiritual tourism should be developed in a sustainable and inclusive way that empowers and benefits local communities (Choe & Di Giovine, 2021). To achieve these objectives, we strongly recommend that governments, tourism authorities and the business sector support small-scale spiritual tourism enterprises with funding, appropriate training programmes and networking opportunities. Our paper is based on the collection of newspaper articles, scholarly articles, government documents, and NGO publications (Bernard, 2006).

The Growth of Spiritual Tourism

Given the popular cultural discourses and empirical benefits related to spiritual practices, traveling for spiritual pursuits has become a global phenomenon (Cheer *et al*., 2017; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Norman, 2011). As spirituality in contemporary society is often dissociated from religious institutions and authorities, the number of people interested in spirituality without being religious has increased (Ito, 2003; Kato & Progano, 2017). Whilst some level of hippies and backpackers have travelled to Asia for a spiritual quest since the 1960s, more organised and packaged spiritual travel of Western tourists to South and Southeast Asia has seen increasing growth in the past decade (Cheer *et al*., 2017; Choe & O' Regan, 2020; Schedneck, 2017). 'Spiritual magnetism' exists in some destinations because of significant historical and geographical backgrounds and social aspects (Buzinde,

2020; Choe & Lew, 2022) as well as 'tourism imaginaries' (Salazar & Graburn, 2016). India, for example, not only attracts spiritual tourists because of its spiritual traditions, spiritual gurus, ashrams / temples, and rituals, but also because of spiritual imaginaries (Nair & Dileep, 2021).

While it is challenging to define spiritual tourism, it can be described as a 'reflexive well-being intervention' driven by some aspects of everyday life that needs improving, and is oriented towards the space of non-work where such problems can be given full attention (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Individuals' intention and purpose for well-being intervention is the foundation for spiritual tourism (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Spiritual tourism also can be described as travel to discover the goal and significance of one's life (Nair & Dileep, 2021).

Spiritual tourism can be categorised under wellness tourism (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019) and includes various forms of activities such as mindfulness and yoga retreats, spiritual pilgrimage, forest bathing and silent walking, etc. (Kato & Progano, 2017). Attending meditation and yoga retreats has been popular for learning new perspectives and techniques of healing mind and body (Norman, 2011). Cheer *et al*. (2017) found that secular drivers of spiritual tourism involve healing, personal development, personal quest, and journeying, etc. Spiritual tourists may be escaping their everyday routine to distant spiritual spaces to work on their problems whilst hoping to experience self-transformation (Norman & Pokorny, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, spiritual practices such as mindfulness and yoga gained more popularity as an effective, low-cost intervention for coping with anxiety, depression and isolation, etc. (Bhalla, Chowdhary & Ranjan, 2021; Götmann & Bechtoldt, 2021; Schedeneck, 2020; Stankov & Filimonau, 2020; Wang & Blasco, 2022; Zhu *et al*., 2021). As a consequence, since destinations reopened after the pandemic, there has been an increasing interest in visiting spiritual places for psychological recoveries, focusing on 'healing' (Choe & Lew, 2022; Ma *et al*., 2021).

Besides the psychological benefits for individuals and tourists, scholars argue that the growth of spiritual tourism may contribute to sustainable and responsible tourism agendas in destinations (e.g. Stankov & Filimonau, 2020) as well as offering more sociocultural exchange, regional development, economic development and environmental enhancements (e.g. Raj & Griffin, 2020). For example, Buddhist philosophical practices are related to ecological ethics (Swearer, 2006), tolerance, positive attitude of mind, benevolence, compassion, positive social relationships, saving resources, vegetarian diet, and peacefulness (Thimm, 2021). Tourists cultivating these values during their travel can positively influence the environmental and socio-cultural sustainability of destinations. Spiritual tourism could also help create income sources for rural and remote areas by contributing to economic sustainability (Dell'orto, 2022).

Whilst the scale of spiritual tourism is not well-measured by public agencies, it has demonstrated immense potential (Griffin & Raj, 2017). For example, Kōyasan, a rural town in Japan, experienced immense economic benefits from spiritual tourism development after the traditional farming industry declined (Progano, 2021). Fifty-two historic Buddhist temples provided attractive temple stay programmes for tourists, including accommodation, meditation sessions, monastic cuisine and other rituals. The town's economy grew, with 84.4% of the workforce now employed in a tourism-related sector (Progano, 2021). The tourism programmes also revitalised the local spiritual culture and community. If developed properly, this form of tourism can be utilised as a sustainable post-COVID recovery strategy in destinations that have spiritual heritage and cultural resources. A recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) report emphasises that Asian destinations that develop wellness and spiritual tourism programmes might recover faster than others in the post pandemic period (Sawada, 2020). It is proposed that Bali, with rich spiritual heritage and unique resources for 'spiritual tourism' should harness this opportunity to develop sustainable and inclusive spiritual tourism programmes as a socio-economic recovery strategy.

Bali's Tourism and Crisis Management

As one of the most visited tourism destinations in Southeast Asia, Bali has been a tourist dependent island since the 1930s (Cole *et al.*, 2021). The opening of Ngurah Rai International Airport in 1969 ignited mass tourism in Bali (Picard, 1996), while Bali's success in tourism is

closely linked to its peaceful image (Hitchcock, 2010). With significant Hindu temples and living heritage, Bali initially focused on cultural tourism, which was adopted by the Indonesian authorities in 1979 as the country's principle tourism policy (Hitchcock, 2010). In the past two decades, however, the island has attracted a large number of mass tourists to beach resorts in the south. Tourists in Bali are primarily from Australia and China, together making up 32.31% of tourists, followed by India, Russia, Japan, etc. (BPS Bali, 2021). In 2019, Bali had 16 million tourists, with 10 million domestic and 6.3 million international tourists (Handayani *et al*., 2021). Bali's tourism industry employs more than 50% of the population in the island (Antara & Sumarniasih, 2017); the contribution of Bali's foreign exchange tourism to the national economy in 2019 was IDR 75 trillion (US$ 5.2 billion) (Handayani *et al*., 2021), and contributed 40% of Indonesia's total tourism income in 2019 (Bali Post, 2019).

Beyond the economic contribution, the rapid growth of mass tourism and large-scale resort development has led to numerous socio-cultural and environmental problems (e.g. Boakes *et al*., 2022; Cole *et al.*, 2021). As Vickers (2015:370) notes, 'the ecology underpinning all aspects of Balinese life is now under terrible threat' due to massive over development. The popular beach areas have suffered from waste problems and traffic jams, which negatively affects local people's quality of life. Increased tourism has led to land use changes especially in the south of the island (Rimba *et al*., 2019) and increased water demands (Cole, 2012; Cole *et al*., 2020; Cole *et al.*, 2021). The island has faced a loss of wet rice cultivation, paddy fields and sustainable local food supplies and agricultural jobs (Aljazeera, 2020b). Economic leakage is a huge problem as many of the large hotels and resorts have been developed by foreign investors (Hitchcock, 2010). Around 85% of the tourism economy in Bali is in the hands of non-Balinese (MacRae, 2016), with much of the remaining large tourism businesses owned and run by local elites (Hitchcock, 2010).

While the island has been successful attracting a high number of international tourists, Bali's tourism income is not being geographically dispersed (Sutresna *et al*., 2021). Income is heavily concentrated in the *Badung* district, which is the urbanised south, where most well-established tourism infrastructure and facilities are located, including the international airport. In 2018, *Badung* district's revenue reached US$ 313 million – more than double the revenue of the other eight districts combined (BPSBali, 2019). While there is an urgent need to disperse the tourism income and benefits to the rest of the island, one of the existing challenges is a lack of infrastructure connecting *Badung* to the north and east parts of the island. Public transportation is under-developed and the poor road system makes tourism development difficult in remote areas. As a consequence, rural villages have high poverty rates, with little access to diversified income sources. There is also a lack of education and job opportunities. Poverty in rural and remote areas accelerated during the pandemic.

Besides those problems, Bali had gone through numerous crises and disasters causing rapid decreases in the number of international tourists. These include the Gulf War in 1990, Cholera outbreaks in 1995, Indonesia's financial crisis in 1998, SARS in 2003, terrorist bombing incidents in 2002 and 2005 and the eruption of Mount Agung in 2017. Bali has been resilient as an international tourism destination with fast recovery times from these crises. With various cultural and religious strategies at the core, the Balinese adopted a number of local measures that helped the alleviation of the various crises (Hitchcock & Putra, 2005; Jenkins & Catra, 2014). For example, they used an approach called 'inter-religious worship and village security capacity building'. The widespread adoption of this measure, designed to avoid conflict, helped to restore confidence in Bali's tourism industry (Hitchcock & Putra, 2005). The Balinese also held purification rituals that helped to reduce the apportionment of blame on religious groups and provided a cathartic outlet for potentially negative energies (Hitchcock & Putra, 2005). For adherents of Balinese Hinduism, huge demonstrations helped to cleanse the trauma of the Kuta bombings and enabled the Balinese to put the crises behind them and to contribute to a recovery strategy (Hitchcock & Putra, 2005). Utilising such cultural and religious strategies as a long-established local resource (Hitchcock & Putra, 2005), Bali has remained 'remarkably quiet and stable, and has continued to attract tourists' (Hitchcock, 2010:102).

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous religious ceremonies were performed with limited restrictions (Aljazeera, 2020; Simabur, 2020). The Hindu Balinese perceive that performing and participating in these rituals is important for community resilience and social well-being.

However, the various crises inevitably led to negative socio-economic impacts, with locals' earnings falling sharply without any alternative income generating opportunities. This led to various social problems such as increased stress, depression and crime (Baker & Coulter, 2007). Emotional and psychological damage from the Kuta bombings were severe on vulnerable workers (Baker & Coulter, 2007). While socio-economic impacts are similar to those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the severity of economic impact caused by COVID-19 was worse than the Kuta bombings and the Mount Agung eruption (Aljazeera, 2020c; Choe & Stafford, 2020; Sugiari, 2020a). To reduce these negative impacts, authorities need to perform more active roles in delivering practical and systematic solutions to support the vulnerable populations in the island.

Bali's Tourism in the COVID-19 Context

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bali experienced devastating socio-economic impacts with almost 100% decrease in international tourist arrivals. The Indonesian government provided limited financial aid programmes (Kontan, 2020). They invested IDR 3.8 trillion (US$ 258 million) to support and revitalise domestic tourism (Junida, 2020). However, with hotel occupancy rates plummeting to one or two percent in Bali, the authorities were forced to cautiously began to re-open the island during 2020 (Subarda & Hughes, 2021). Bali reopened on July 31st 2020 for domestic tourism amidst rising COVID-19 cases in the country. However, the decision sparked public frustration as 'the government ignored scientific advice and ... [was] ... inconsistent in the handling of the coronavirus outbreak' (Smith & Prema, 2020). Some local people started a social media campaign against the government's decision, using the hashtag #IndonesiaTerserah, meaning "Whatever, Indonesia" (Smith & Prema, 2020). Tourism experts also warned that if the reopening was too early without clear safety and health measurements, a second / third wave could cost more in the long-term (Aljazeera, 2020a; Connors, 2020). Upon reopening on July 31, Bali recorded the fastest-rising death rates from COVID-19 in Indonesia (Barker, 2020). Whilst well-guided and consistent information from any government was seen as key to control the impact of the pandemic (Handayani *et al*., 2021), there seemed to be a lack of accurate and rigorous safety measurement systems, transparent data reports, appropriate investments and effective communication with public by the Indonesian government (Aljazeera, 2020b; Jaffrey, 2020). Governments and tourism authorities should have reassured the public and enforced public 'safety and health' (Setboonsarng, 2020) as a means to rebuild Bali as a 'trusted' destination. On the contrary, a much-publicised intention to re-open Bali to international tourism in September 2020 'failed to materialise in the face of a worsening situation' (Subadra & Hughes, 2021:26).

On October 14, 2021, when Bali officially reopened to international flights, there were only 45 international tourists (Jamaluddin & Marcus, 2021). The Indonesian government was criticised after announcing that they would not welcome backpackers to Bali, while focusing on 'quality (wealthy) tourists' (Hutton, 2021). While economic recovery was prioritised, Bali forwent long-term planning, with little evidence of holistic approaches of sustainable perspectives. For example, the authorities should have further developed and revitalised the domestic tourism market, which contributes to less leakage, offers longer stays, provides more support for local businesses such as accommodation and food, and causes a lower carbon footprint (Ramadhian, 2020; Subadra & Hughes, 2021; Widistuti, 2020).

Authorities did launch a 'We Love Bali' campaign for domestic tourism, and a 'Cleanliness, Health, Safety and Environment' accreditation scheme and recovery grants (Rosidin, 2020; Sugiari, 2020b; Tourism Department of Bali, 2020b;). However, while over 800 Balinese businesses applied (Tourism Department of Bali, 2020a), 'most smaller operators were unable to meet the stringent requirements of the scheme. Domestic tourism therefore appeared to be benefiting only the better-off tourism businesses' (Subadra & Hughes, 2021:126). Thus, poverty levels remain high in remote areas of the island, where tourism businesses are largely small scale. While the pandemic also accelerated poverty in the rural villages in the north-east of the island (Aljazeera,

2020c), there was little attempt to improve infrastructure and tourism facilities. Thus, there is an urgent need to alleviate poverty by creating diverse income sources in these areas and supporting small tourism businesses, including spiritual tourism as well as agri-tourism, gastronomy tourism and wellness tourism, etc (Choe & Stafford, 2020; Rourke, 2020).

Sustainable Spiritual Tourism in Bali

Spiritual tourism can be a part of socio-economic recovery strategies as well as a long-term means for protecting and revitalising spiritual heritage in Bali (Pageh *et al*., 2022). Bali contains unique and differentiated spiritual, cultural and natural resources including living heritage such as daily rituals and religious ceremonies among local Hindu people, as well as tranquil natural environments. The island has over 4,000 temples and the it is often described as 'the land of a thousand temples' (Hitchcock, 2010:104). The Balinese religion can be described as 'Bali Hindu' which also follows the old religion. This comprises between 80 and 95% of the population (Hitchcock, 2010). Balinese people also traditionally believe and still practice *Tri Hita Karana* (THK) as their core concept of well-being and spirituality. *Tri Hita Karana* means 'three sources of well-being' and is commonly regarded as the traditional guiding principle of Balinese life as well as a foundational inspiration for development policies (Adityanandana & Gerber, 2019). According to the THK cosmology, one's pursuit of happiness must establish a harmonious relationship with fellow humans, nature and the divine (Agung, 2005; Peters & Wardana, 2013; Roth & Sedana, 2015).

In the pre-COVID pandemic period, spiritual tourism was becoming increasingly popular in Bali. Ubud, where *Eat Pray Love* was filmed had been growing as an international spiritual tourism destination due to the book and movie, in which the protagonist makes a journey to Bali to seek 'spiritual healing.' Ubud, literally meaning 'medicine' in the Balinese traditional language, has been a spiritual centre for Balinese people for centuries, with a number of culturally significant temples, medicinal traditions and healers. In the past decade, the village has become crowded with foreign 'spiritual seekers' (Brenhouse, 2010), and now has been transformed into a vibrant city with numerous luxurious yoga resorts, five star hotels, Western restaurants, cafes and wine bars which are used by predominantly foreign tourists.

There has also been an increasing concern about the new 'spiritual tourism' phenomenon in Bali (O'Connor & Kim, 2014), as most of the products and programmes are run by foreign travel companies. Many are overly-commercialised, and target middle-class Western tourists (MacRae, 2016). Western 'yoga tourists' (Sutarya, 2021) often stay and practice yoga at luxurious 5-star hotels within their 'tourist bubble' without experiencing the local culture or spiritual practices in Bali. The great majority of the tour companies offering spiritual experiences and most of the spiritual / yoga tourism-related businesses in Bali are also foreign owned and offer low-paid jobs to locals employed as drivers, cleaners, and tour guides (MacRae, 2016; O'Connor & Kim, 2014). Thus, spiritual tourism businesses, which focus on the luxury market have barely benefited the local economy, community and people. Few local people (who live in poverty, who have a low-income level and poor educational and employment opportunities), have experienced the benefits of the 'spiritual tourism boom'. In fact, the rapid growth and development of spiritual tourism have pushed poorer locals to the margins. Some locals have lost their land due to the development of international hotels, resorts and yoga centres, and those all-inclusive spiritual facilities.

Furthermore, the existing predominant spiritual tourism products in Bali are not connected to Bali's local spiritual culture and nature, such as THK. The majority of Western tourists visit centres targeted at their personal requirements, with spa treatments or yoga classes (Choe & Di Giovine, 2021) that are separated from local spiritual culture and communities. As a parallel, local Hindu people visit holy temples and sacred water springs (Sutarya, 2021) that are believed to have high 'spiritual vibration,' with high spiritual energy (e.g. Holloway, 2003; Siegel, 2013; Sutarya, 2021) and where they can feel connected with nature (e.g. Sutama, 2013), or visit spiritual gurus in Hindu priests' houses (Sutarya & Sirtha, 2017). Observing this phenomenon, local scholars (e.g. Budiasih, 2018; Dewi, 2020; Sukaatmadja *et al*., 2017; Sutarya, 2019; Utama & Wiguna, 2020) believe that spiritual tourism products in Bali should be connected with the Bali's Hindu rituals and temple visits.

Instead of the current forms of yoga tourism creating 'tourist bubbles,' spiritual tourism should be developed in a way that supports local cultures and traditions, and contributes to maintaining traditional cultures and values and revitalise them. Spiritual tourism programmes should collaborate with small scale businesses such as homestays, transportation, restaurants, small healthy food cafés, vegetarian cooking schools, the creative arts sector, and local yoga studios. Small-scale community-based spiritual tourism programmes could provide tourists with traditional farming and fishing culture experiences as well as mindfulness and yoga practices (Choe & Stafford, 2020). This could also help protect the native cultural heritage and agriculture and may help prevent locals from losing their properties, and help revitalise their cultures, traditions and art (e.g. Sutresna *et al*., 2021).

In the post COVID period, spiritual tourism practices should achieve a balance between the profit seeking nature of tourism business, and spirituality, so as to encourage local people and community involvement (Dolezal & Novelli, 2020; Hung *et al*., 2017; Wimalaratana, 2014; Shereni & Saarinen, 2020). Balinese local academics increasingly emphasise that empowerment of communities and sustainable tourism development is required, so as to help maintain their culture and natural resources (e.g. Juniari & Mahyuni, 2020; Sutawa, 2012). Sutawa (2012) argues that supporting and empowering the community requires a role for locally-owned businesses like homestays, and recommends that the government should provide management skills training and hospitality business knowledge. Poorer and marginalised communities must be included in the development process as their local knowledge and wisdom can become an important asset / input in tourism planning and management in the villages (Sutawa, 2012). Spiritual tourism in Bali should be developed in a way that empowers communities to manage tourism growth and achieve community aspirations relating to their well-being, and economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development (Astawa *et al*., 2019).

During the COVID pandemic, some of the well-known, foreign owned yoga studios for Westerners successfully sustained their businesses through digital video platforms and advanced marketing skills. Many locally run yoga / meditation centres lacked the resources, skill and hardware to continue running or compete. This demonstrates that local Balinese yoga instructors often lack the marketing and financial resources to attract global spiritual tourists. While large resorts are well positioned to benefit from a growth in post-pandemic spiritual travel, small, locally owned wellness tourism businesses are not (Choe & Di Giovine, 2021).

However, some of the current challenges can be overcome through attention and support from authorities. Collaboration between tourism stakeholders, the national government, Bali authorities, tourism authorities, local academics, local communities, tourism businesses, and tourism-related associations is needed to further capture and build on spiritual tourism potentials so as to improve community resilience through new and diversified income sources, that bring sustainable livelihoods. Spiritual tourism businesses, which utilise local cultural heritage can create income sources but also help revitalise cultural heritage when connected to the local culture and communities (Cohen, 1989; Schedneck, 2017). While spiritual tourism development can be part of Bali's post COVID pandemic recovery strategy, diversification of tourism products and programmes is necessary (Brandon, 2022).

Conclusion

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic caused devastating socio-economic impacts in tourism destinations, such as Bali, government and tourism authorities can take this as a turning point for more sustainable directions and futures of tourism development. Before COVID-19, overly commercialised mass tourism, combined with a lack of government intervention caused problems in Bali, such as excessive waste issues, traffic congestion, water shortages, and loss of agricultural jobs. The island's 'tourism boom' barely benefited locals because of economic leakage and the existence of 'tourist bubbles'. The majority of tourism activity and income were kept in the *Badung* district without sufficient dispersion to other parts of the island. Utilising the pause of international tourist arrivals to Bali and slow recovery, Bali should improve their tourism product, so as to build a more inclusive and resilient strategy.

With an increasing demand for spiritual travel in the post pandemic period, Bali has new opportunities as a spiritual tourism destination based on their rich cultural and natural resources, and living heritage. While existing 'tourism imaginaries' (Salazar & Graburn, 2016) as a spiritual destination have contributed to numerous tourism products, these imaginaries should include locals, their businesses and their spiritual practices. Spiritual tourism development can contribute to local peoples' lives and community development through invigorating and creating sustainable livelihoods and providing diverse income sources (Pageh *et al*., 2022) as well as helping revitalise the local spiritual culture. However, development should be connected to, involve and empower local people and communities.

The touristification of spirituality (Geary, 2002) is widespread in low-income countries in Asia (Thimm, 2021), however, this commodified spirituality or mindfulness has often been reserved for luxury tourism products (McGoarty *et al*., 2020). Beyond the luxury yoga resort developments, governments, tourism authorities and large businesses should invest in supporting small-scale spiritual tourism businesses, to help build more sustainable and resilient spiritual tourism futures (Cheer & Lew, 2017). This is also based on changing tourist interests, as greater numbers of tourists prefer small-scale, community-based and cultural experiences, prefer to travel to remote and rural areas, and like to engage in spiritual practices and activities for their psychological recovery. Thus, small-scale, locally run spiritual tourism programmes, including meditation and yoga retreats, spas, nature-walking, and healthy eating / cooking establishments can be developed, based on existing cultural and natural resources in collaboration with local agricultural or aquacultural industries.

Finally, Bali's heavy reliance on the tourism sector has been recognised as problematic, given that the risks of over-concentration on a single sector are high (Baker & Coulter, 2007). Bali needs to develop a diversified economy to build a resilient long-term future (Cheer & Lew, 2017; Mahyuni, 2020). Any post COVID-19 tourism recovery strategy must focus on the poorest communities in rural Bali where poverty rates accelerated even more during the pandemic. Baker and Coulter (2007:263) argue that,

> *until there are fallback positions to reduce the vulnerability of those involved in tourism, the sector can never be a foundation for the development of sustainable livelihoods, particularly for those working at the margins of tourism.*

Mindful of this, authorities in Bali should support more opportunities for the poor, and offer investment, education and appropriate training programmes to reduce poverty (Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Shinde, 2010). As Japan and South Korea have successfully developed more community and local culture integrated spiritual tourism models such as temple-stays and temple food cooking programmes (NZHerald, 2022; Graham, 2022), the Indonesian and Bali authorities, as well as tourism authorities can benchmark future development against the successful aspects of the Japanese and South Korean Buddhist / spiritual temple tourism programmes (Schedneck, 2021).

This conceptual paper contributes to the spiritual tourism literature by providing critical perspectives and broadening geographical locations and cultural contexts. Whilst Southeast Asia receives a large number of spiritual tourists because of its rich spiritual tourism heritage and tourism resources, there is a dearth of research on this topic especially that which involves local scholars. Whilst spiritual tourism research is still a minor area in the field of tourism studies, it has been researched predominantly by Western scholars through the Western conceptualisations, methodologies and contexts. Spiritual tourism literature focuses primarily on aspects of tourists' well-being and self-transformation; and destination management and marketing. This paper broadens the scope of research by considering the impacts of spiritual tourism on local and marginalised communities in a developing destination. Future research should explore the socio-economic, cultural and environmental impacts of spiritual tourism in diverse locations, and include local scholarship and contexts in order to develop more comprehensive and holistic conceptualisations, methods and literature.

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