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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

**FROM HANDMADE TO MASS-PRODUCED AND NO WAY BACK?
GLOBALISATION, SOUVENIRS AND SMALL BUSINESSES IN VANUATU**
Alexander Trupp (Sunway University, atrupp@sunway.edu.my), Chetan Shah (University of Auckland,
chetan.shah@auckland.ac.nz), Michael Hitchcock (University of London, M.Hitchcock@gold.ac.uk)

Abstract

This study delves into the economic and sociocultural dimensions of the souvenir sector from the unique perspective of local market vendors in the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. Findings reveal a heavy reliance on imported souvenirs, particularly for the cruise-ship market. Such practices often lead to the commodification and misrepresentation of local cultures and destinations, driven by the demands of tourists and the broader processes of international exchange and globalisation. By giving voice to grassroots producers and vendors within the handicrafts and souvenir sector, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the sector's dynamics and its role within the broader context of global tourism and economic change in emerging island economies.

Keywords: Globalisation; imported vs local products; small businesses; souvenirs; island states

Introduction

In the context of emerging island economies, microbusinesses in countries like Vanuatu play a significant role in the local economy by selling handicrafts and souvenirs (Grobar 2019; Trupp et al., 2023). These souvenirs not only contribute to local income and employment but also shape the image of tourism destinations (Thirumaran et al., 2014). While such items are typically handmade and reflect local artisan skills, the production process has sometimes shifted towards meeting the preferences of tourists. Consequently, souvenirs may no longer authentically represent local traditions but serve as tangible proof of having visited specific places (Hitchcock, 2000; Taylor, 2016). This paper aims to explore the economic and sociocultural dimensions of the handicraft and souvenir sector, as perceived by market vendors and microbusinesses in the emerging island economy of Vanuatu. A particular focus is placed on the dynamics of imported versus locally-produced souvenir products. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the impacts of tourism, globalisation, and economic and sociocultural transformation in emerging economies (Cave et al., 2013; Tolkach & Pratt, 2021). Additionally, it amplifies the voices of grassroots (Cheer et al., 2013) producers and vendors within the handicrafts and souvenir sector.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected in Port Vila, Vanuatu, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The research permits necessary for empirical data collection were obtained from national authorities. 14 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with micro-entrepreneurs engaged in the souvenir and handicraft business, and

stakeholders from relevant ministries and associations. These research participants played crucial roles in either the production or sale of craft and souvenir items, and in some cases, held multiple roles such as business owner, manager, producer, or vendor. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives from the Ministry of Tourism and a handicraft association to gain insights into the socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts that shape the handicraft sector. Observations and field notes were recorded at various handicraft markets and shops in Port Vila to document the types of souvenirs available and interactions between buyers and vendors. Data analysis followed data-driven coding strategies adapted from Corbin and Strauss (2008), leading to the identification of key themes and categories supported by interview quotes.

Results and Discussion

Before the region's transition from subsistence cultivation to a cash-oriented economy, carving and weaving served important secular and religious functions (Horoi, 1980). In the 1950s, commercial airlines settled down, and international tourism started to grow, though at relatively low levels (Douglas & Douglas, 2004). Today, In Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, a striking 80-90 percent of crafts and souvenirs are imported, as confirmed through on-site observations, interviews, and publicly available information (Roberts, 2018). The government has made efforts to promote locally-made products and small businesses by establishing a handicraft marketplace in the city center. This market, opened in late 2017, exclusively features Vanuatu-made crafts, including woven baskets, paintings, wood carvings, and jewelry, and is operated by around 50 vendors. Despite these efforts, the majority of tourism-related items in Port Vila's city center are still imported products, primarily sourced from China and other Asian countries through a wholesaler located outside the town. Many vendors now specialize in selling these imported, mass-manufactured items, as exemplified by a participant from the cruise-ship market:

I buy form Chinatown, I mean Chinese shop. We always say Chinatown [laughing]. . . Magnets are my bestsellers. (IVA 4)

This shift from local to imported products has historical roots, with vendors recalling a turning point when they were compelled to change their product offerings to comply with biosecurity and quarantine regulations imposed by their main tourism source markets, Australia and New Zealand, approximately 15-20 years ago:

We used to sell the local products here [at the cruise-ship market] and then they [the authorities] just stopped everything. Quarantine [regulations] just stopped everything; they stopped everything, the mat, the shell, the coral. Everything, they stopped it. So we had to find things from the Chinese. (IVA 11)

Furthermore, international agreements such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) have had a significant impact on handicraft sales. Items made from wood, plants, and marine or animal products must meet stringent quarantine requirements to be eligible for export to Australia and New Zealand. As a

result, many cruise-ship vendors felt compelled to transition to selling mass-manufactured and imported souvenirs. This shift in sourcing has persisted, as government officials have only recently begun encouraging the sale of local products once more. Vendors have been provided with booklets to assist them in promoting Vanuatu-made crafts, aligning with the objectives of the Vanuatu National Sustainable Development Plan 2020 (Department of Industry, n.d.).

However, convincing vendors who have already transitioned to imported souvenir items to revert to local products has proven challenging, highlighting the enduring impact of international agreements like CITES.

Now they try to encourage [local products] again, just last month they came and the government they start to tell us to sell our local product again. Last month, they gave us the booklet. Any time, any tourists want to buy a matt, fan, chair, or anything, we can show them the booklet. Australian and Vanuatu governments have come to make an agreement. (IVA 11)

Moreover, the decline in locally-made products is also attributed to the perceived loss of local cultural knowledge and skills, particularly in carving:

Because some of them, their husband don't know how to carve. They don't know how to carve and some of them, they don't know how to create different things. (IVA 7)

In recent years, parts of the Vanuatu government and other international organisations have pushed for more sustainable handicrafts that should ideally reflect locally sourced products and culturally authentic designs (Department of Industry, n.d.). Campaigns and educational materials have been introduced to assist both vendors and tourists in identifying potential quarantine concerns associated with Vanuatu's handicrafts (PHAMA, 2017). The handicraft vendor booklet further provides instructions on inspecting handicrafts to see if they comply with quarantine regulations.

While vendors focusing on local handicrafts generally welcome these initiatives, those who have shifted to imported souvenirs remain resistant to change. This resistance underscores how international agreements like CITES have left a lasting impact, one not easily reversed. Furthermore, the nature of cruise tourism in Vanuatu has changed, with tourists purchasing fewer souvenirs than in the past. Cruise-ship tourists are distinguished from overnight tourists, with the former being perceived as temporary visitors who come and go quickly, while the latter are considered traditional tourists. Cruise tourism has been criticized for not effectively distributing tourism benefits to the local level, benefiting primarily cruise-ship market vendors while leaving many other businesses in the city excluded from these developments.

Honest words, we do not like cruise-ship tourists because they tell me things like: we can't take this because the Australian custom won't let us. You see! [They] always repeat those words in front of me. I am a Ni-Van [Ni-Vanuatu]. I am not an Australian. What I have is what I can sell. (IVA 1)

In Vanuatu, the positive economic impacts of cruise tourism are mainly limited to those vendors located at the cruise-ship market. At the same time, most other businesses in the city cannot benefit from this development. A more inclusive tourism development that benefits a broader range of stakeholders, including small businesses and local communities, is needed. The case of Vanuatu reveals that souvenir consumption often prioritizes factors other than authenticity (Douglas & Douglas, 2004; Kumar et al., 2022), with many souvenirs being mass-manufactured products only loosely connected to local traditions. Furthermore, this research addresses the underrepresentation of local indigenous voices within the handicrafts and souvenir sector discourse, shedding light on the economic and sociocultural transformations experienced by local communities in emerging economies through the lens of tourism and globalisation.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the handicraft and souvenir sector in Vanuatu, with a specific focus on the challenges associated with imported versus locally-produced products. The heavy reliance on imported souvenirs, driven by regulatory changes and shifting tourist preferences, has led to a commodification of local culture and traditions. Efforts to revive the sale of locally-made products face resistance from vendors who have already transitioned to selling imported items. Moreover, the changing nature of cruise tourism has impacted souvenir purchasing patterns. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on tourism, globalisation, and their effects on emerging economies, emphasizing the need for more inclusive tourism development that benefits a broader range of stakeholders, including small businesses and local communities.

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