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Beyond Western Dominance? The Rise of Asia and the Middle East in Global Tourism

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<p>Dr. Muhammad Kashif* Senior Lecturer, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Corresponding Author Email: Kashif3133@gmail.com</p> <p>Sahibzada Junaid Anjum Lecturer, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: junaid.anjum@riphah.edu.pk</p> <p>Adil Hassan MS Scholar, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: adil.hk35040@gmail.com</p> <p>Sikandar Usman MS Scholar, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: Sikandarusmaniui@gmail.com</p> <p>Asad Ullah MS Scholar, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: asadkhan9028@gmail.com</p> <p>Muhammad Essa Khan MS Scholar, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: 39230@students.riphah.edu.pk</p> <p>Luqman Said MS Scholar, Riphah School of Leadership, Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS), Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan Email: 37741@students.riphah.edu.pk</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>This conceptual study examines the changing dynamics of global tourism through a comparative analysis of destinations across five macro-regions: Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, academic studies, and digital tourism narratives, the paper explores how tourism is increasingly shaped by governance strategies, digital media interaction, and sustainability-oriented development. The analysis indicates that emerging destinations, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, are becoming increasingly competitive with long-established Western destinations, not only through infrastructure investment but also through active policy entrepreneurship and culturally grounded digital storytelling. The study argues that global tourism is moving toward a more multipolar configuration, where narrative control, symbolic legitimacy, and digital agency play a central role in destination competitiveness. By integrating postcolonial perspectives with tourism governance and media-based branding, the paper offers a conceptual framework that helps explain contemporary shifts in global tourism hierarchies and provides directions for future empirical research.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p>	<p>Global Tourism, Emerging Destinations, Destination Branding, Digital Storytelling, Sustainable Tourism, Policy Entrepreneurship, Postcolonial Tourism</p>

Visual Abstract



Introduction

Tourism, which was previously characterized by Euro-American supremacy and aestheticism based on Western modernity, is undergoing a radical transformation (Shakeela et al., 2025a). Throughout the 20th century, global tourism circuits were largely centered on the historic capitals and city centers of North America and selected Mediterranean coastlines. Cities such as Paris, London, Rome, and New York emerged not only as major tourist destinations but also as symbolic sites of civilization, heritage, and global cultural capital (Zhang et al., 2022). This dominance was not incidental; rather, the legacies of colonization, systemic global disparities, and disproportionate infrastructural and institutional capacity positioned Western destinations as the primary beneficiaries of international tourism flows (Dreher et al., 2023).

Since the early decades of the 21st century, however, this historical monopoly has been increasingly challenged by changes in the global political economy, digital media cultures, and the evolving psychographics of travelers (Tripathi et al., 2023). The global tourism landscape is developing a new spatial awareness that is no longer dominated by romanticized Western metropolises. Non-traditional tourism players, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, have gained prominence within this paradigmatic reconfiguration (Shakeela et al., 2025). As a result, the global tourist gaze has increasingly shifted toward cities such as Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, Istanbul, and Doha, disrupting long-established hierarchies of prestige and desirability. This realignment has been driven by several macrostructural forces. Economic growth in emerging markets, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region and East and Southeast Asia, has enabled substantial investments in tourism infrastructure, place branding, and digital innovation (Saleh Alshehri, 2022). Policy initiatives such as China's Belt and Road framework, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and Malaysia's Tourism Transformation Plans demonstrate the growing centrality of tourism within national development agendas. At the same time, the digitalization of travel through social media platforms, booking services, and influencer-led marketing has democratized destination visibility, allowing less-established destinations to challenge long-held tourism hierarchies (Băcilă et al., 2022). Post-COVID-19 behavioral shifts toward crowd avoidance, authenticity-seeking, and health-oriented travel have further diversified global tourism flows, reducing dependence on saturated Western destinations (Yang et al., 2025).

The present study responds to these transformations by advancing a media-informed, policy-oriented, and comparatively critical conceptual analysis of global tourism dynamics. It examines the role of discursive power, strategic governance, and branding innovation across five macro-regions: North America, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Lavenex et al., 2022). Rather than relying solely on economic measurements, the study emphasizes the cultural, political, and narrative dimensions of tourism development. The current work fills a gap in the tourism literature by offering a cross-regional, postcolonial account of how emerging destinations are reshaping global

tourism in the post-pandemic context. Although previous studies have focused on tourism recovery and resilience (Farber et al., 2023; Kulshreshtha & Michopoulou, 2025; Pang et al., 2025), relatively few have integrated digital media, governance strategies, and cultural narratives within a single analytical framework.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What digital and policy innovations are redefining emerging tourism destinations within new global tourism hierarchies?
2. What forms of narrative sovereignty are evident in destination branding strategies in Asia and the Middle East?
3. How do governance models and technological adoption influence tourism resilience and competitiveness across regions?

Recent global reports by UNWTO and WTTC (2024–2025) indicate that Asia and the Middle East account for more than 40 percent of post-COVID tourism recovery, reinforcing their growing global significance (Shakeela et al., 2025).

Literature Review

This section provides a critical synthesis of the literature on the changing geographies of global tourism and establishes the theoretical and contextual foundations of the study. Adopting a thematic approach, it examines key strands of scholarship related to Eurocentric tourism dominance, postcolonial tourism theory, soft power and destination identity, policy entrepreneurship, digital storytelling and smart tourism, and post-COVID-19 resilience. The section concludes by identifying gaps in literature and positioning the current study within ongoing academic and policy debates.

Existing research on global tourism has predominantly focused on Western destinations or localized regional cases, with limited comparative and theory-driven engagement with emerging tourism regions. Although recent studies have explored tourism recovery, smart tourism, and sustainability, relatively few integrate postcolonial perspectives, governance strategies, and narrative dynamics within a cross-regional conceptual framework. This limitation constrains understanding of how emerging destinations in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America are reshaping global tourism hierarchies.

From Eurocentric Dominance to Multipolar Tourism Geographies

Tourism geographies have historically been shaped by Euro-American dominance, where cultural prestige, infrastructural advantage, and media representation created an elite circuit of global travel (Johar et al., 2025). The tourist gaze was constructed through Western norms of leisure, luxury, and authenticity, positioning cities such as Paris, London, Rome, and New York as aspirational destinations reinforced by guidebooks, film, and tour operators (Iqbal et al., 2025).

Since the early 21st century, however, scholars increasingly observe a reorganization of this spatial order. Emerging destinations across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America have gained prominence through economic expansion, rising middle-class mobility, and deliberate policy intervention (Zreik, 2024). This shift has contributed to what is described as a multipolar tourism order, where tourism flows, innovation, and symbolic influence are no longer concentrated in Western centers (Ángel Martín et al., 2025; El-Dabt et al., 2025). Indicators such as the Travel and Tourism Development Index (WEF, 2024) reflect this trend, showing incremental gains by emerging destinations in governance, infrastructure, and price competitiveness.

Postcolonial Theory and Imaginary Tourism

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for examining how tourism imaginaries have historically marginalized non-Western destinations. Foundational works by Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), and Hall (1997) demonstrate how Orientalist discourses constructed the Global South as exotic, backward, or peripheral, shaping both political and touristic representations. Tourism scholars argue that such representations continue to reproduce power asymmetries by commodifying cultural difference and reinforcing symbolic hierarchies (Hollinshead, 1999; Mowforth & Munt, 2016).

Recent scholars highlight how emerging destinations actively contest these narratives by reclaiming historical agencies and cultural representation. Mega-events such as Expo 2020 Dubai and FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, alongside heritage-based branding and Islamic tourism initiatives, illustrate attempts to reassert narrative sovereignty and reposition destinations within global tourism imaginaries (Akbarzadeh et al., 2025). These developments signal not only rebranding strategies but broader epistemological challenges to knowledge of Western-centric tourism.

Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Destination Identity

The concept of soft power, defined as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004), has become increasingly relevant in tourism research. Tourism is now widely understood as a tool of cultural diplomacy and international image-building (Anholt, 2007; Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Empirical studies document how



countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and South Korea strategically employ tourism to project national identity, diversify economies, and enhance global legitimacy (Stephenson & Ali-Knight, 2010; Dinnie, 2016). In this context, destination branding extends beyond marketing to encompass geopolitical signaling and regional identity formation. Initiatives such as ASEAN tourism cooperation and Gulf Cooperation Council strategies reflect a shift from purely national branding toward regional soft power articulation (Avraham, 2020). This literature underscores tourism's expanding role in mediating culture, diplomacy, and power.

Policy Entrepreneurship and State-Led Tourism Governance.

The transformation of emerging tourism economies is closely linked to policy entrepreneurship and state-led governance. Unlike market-driven Western models, many Global South destinations adopt centralized, strategic tourism policies aligned with national development agendas (Shao et al., 2021; Zada et al., 2025). Vision-based frameworks such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Vision 2031, and Thailand 4.0 integrate tourism with economic diversification, digitalization, and social reform.

Scholars note that these top-down governance models facilitate rapid infrastructural development, coordinated branding, and global visibility, often leveraging mega-events and public-private partnerships. At the same time, they raise concerns regarding sustainability, equity, and cultural commodification (Goh, 2021). This strand of literature highlights governance as a central differentiating factor between established and emerging tourism destinations.

Digital Storytelling and Smart Tourism of Competitive Branding

The literature on smart tourism emphasizes the growing use of digital technologies—such as artificial intelligence, big data, augmented reality, and virtual tours—to enhance visitor experiences and destination competitiveness (Leung, 2020). Beyond infrastructure, scholars increasingly recognize digital storytelling as a key mechanism through which destinations construct and disseminate narratives (Kindzule-Millere et al., 2022).

Emerging destinations have been particularly active in leveraging social media platforms and influencer-driven content to democratize branding and engage global audiences (Choe et al., 2022). This participatory approach contrasts with traditional top-down marketing models and enables destinations to build authenticity and resilience, especially among younger travelers and in post-COVID contexts (Elkhwesky et al., 2022).

Tourism Resilience, Recovery, and Global Rebalancing Post-COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural vulnerabilities in global tourism systems, particularly in destinations heavily reliant on international mass tourism (Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022). In contrast, several emerging destinations demonstrated greater resilience through early reopening, domestic tourism activation, digital continuity, and policy support mechanisms.

Recent studies argue that the pandemic accelerated shifts toward diversified, sustainable, and decentralized tourism models (Huang & Wang, 2023). UNWTO (2023) data indicate that Asia and the Middle East experienced some of the fastest recovery trajectories, suggesting an ongoing rebalancing of global tourism flows driven by strategic governance, innovation, and adaptability.

Research Gaps and Conceptual Direction of the Current Study

Despite the breadth of existing research, several gaps remain evident. Comparative studies continue to privilege North–South binaries, while multipolar perspectives remain underdeveloped. Postcolonial tourism strategies are insufficiently integrated into policy-oriented tourism research, and limited attention has been given to the convergence of governance, digital branding, and soft power in emerging destinations. Moreover, few studies offer systematic conceptual syntheses of tourism resilience across regions in the post-pandemic context.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing a comparative conceptual framework that examines tourism repositioning across five macro-regions: Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. By integrating postcolonial theory, policy entrepreneurship, digital storytelling, and tourism resilience, the study contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of contemporary global tourism transformation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the theoretical positioning and conceptual framework of the study. Building on the reviewed literature, it integrates insights from postcolonial tourism studies, soft power theory, policy entrepreneurship, and digital media studies to explain the contemporary reconfiguration of global tourism geographies. The framework moves beyond traditional East–West binaries and conceptualizes global tourism as an increasingly multipolar field shaped by governance, narrative agency, and symbolic power.

Global Tourism Paradigms: From West-Centric Dominance to Pluralistic Landscapes

Historically, global tourism has been culturally dominated by a Euro-American worldview in which the tourist gaze was defined by Western notions of authenticity, sophistication, and prestige. Cities such as Paris, Rome, London, and New York were not only constructed as destinations but also represented the global ideal of travel, reinforced through powerful media industries, global tour operators, and long-standing institutional legacies (Grix et al., 2024).

Since the early 21st century, tourism has entered a paradigmatic shift toward a more decentralized and polycentric geography. This transformation has been driven by rapid economic development, cultural revival, digital connectivity, and targeted state intervention in the Global South. The so-called pluralistic turn in tourism highlights the emergence of alternative cultural hubs and new symbolic geographies that challenge the historical dominance of Western destinations (Yorgun et al., 2024). Rather than replacing Western destinations, this shift reflects a redistribution of symbolic and material influence across multiple tourism centers, giving rise to a pluralistic global tourism landscape.

Table 1: Comparison of Traditional and Emerging Tourism Paradigms

Feature	Traditional (Western) Paradigm	Emerging (Asian / Middle Eastern) Paradigm
Dominant Narrative	Eurocentric heritage and luxury	Cultural hybridity, modern tradition
Market Driver	Mass package tourism	Experiential & independent travel
Governance Model	Bureaucratic management	Entrepreneurial state & PPPs
Media Representation	Hollywood, National Geographic	Instagram, TikTok, regional influencers
Tourist Demographics	Euro-American middle class	Global middle class (BRICS, ASEAN)
Technology Integration	Moderate	High (AI, AR/VR, e-visas, smart tourism)

Note: PPPs = Public-Private Partnerships; BRICS = Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; AI = Artificial Intelligence; AR/VR = Augmented / Virtual Reality.

Postcolonial Repositioning and Narrative Sovereignty in Tourism

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding how global tourism hierarchies have been historically constructed and how they are increasingly being contested. Foundational scholars such as Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), and Hall (1997) demonstrated how colonial histories and Orientalist discourses shaped representations of non-Western destinations as exotic, peripheral, or underdeveloped.

In recent decades, destinations in Asia and the Middle East have actively challenged these epistemic hierarchies by reclaiming narrative sovereignty. Mega-events such as Expo 2020 Dubai and FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, large-scale infrastructural projects (e.g., Burj Khalifa, AIUla), and the revalorization of indigenous and religious heritage illustrate how emerging destinations are repositioning themselves within global tourism imaginaries (Brdesee, 2024; Zreik, 2024).

This repositioning represents not only a symbolic inversion but a structural transformation in the production of tourism-related identity, soft power, and spatial value.

Policy Entrepreneurship and State-Led Transformation of Tourism

Unlike market-driven or laissez-faire tourism models commonly associated with Western destinations, many emerging economies have adopted proactive, state-led approaches to tourism development (Hazaea et al., 2024). Policy entrepreneurship plays a central role in this process, embedding tourism within broader national development agendas focused on economic diversification, image reconstruction, and geopolitical relevance.

National frameworks such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Vision 2031, and Thailand 4.0 exemplify how tourism is strategically integrated with digitalization, urban development, and social reform. These initiatives position tourism not as a peripheral sector but as a core nation-building instrument. The entrepreneurial state model enables centralized coordination, rapid infrastructural transformation, and synchronized global branding. At the same time, it raises important questions regarding sustainability, social inclusion, and cultural commodification, which remain central to contemporary tourism governance debates.

Digital Storytelling, Smart Tourism, and Destination Branding

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped how tourism destinations are imagined, communicated, and experienced. Smart tourism integrates digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, augmented reality, and virtual platforms to create personalized and immersive travel experiences (Leung, 2020).

Beyond technological infrastructure, digital storytelling has emerged as a critical mechanism for destination branding. Social media platforms, user-generated content, and influencer-driven narratives allow destinations to engage global audiences directly, by passing traditional Western-dominated media channels (Kindzule-Millere et al., 2022). In this context, digital media functions not merely as a marketing tool but as a site of narrative power, enabling emerging destinations to construct authenticity, visibility, and resilience—particularly in post-crisis environments.

Toward a Multipolar Tourism Order: Conceptual Synthesis

Drawing together the above perspectives, this study conceptualizes global tourism as transitioning toward a multipolar order characterized by dispersed symbolic capital, diversified governance models, and expanding narrative agency. The transformation of global tourism geographies can be understood through the interaction of four key dimensions:

Theoretical Lens	Analytical Focus
Postcolonial Tourism Studies	Deconstruction of epistemic hierarchies and validation of peripheral narratives
Policy Entrepreneurship Theory	Strategic role of the state in tourism transformation
Soft Power Theory	Tourism as a tool of diplomatic influence and image construction
Digital Media & Storytelling	Participatory narrative formation and visual culture

Together, these dimensions provide a critical scaffolding for understanding how tourism is being reterritorialized in a post-globalization context. Global tourism is no longer organized around a single hegemonic center but around multiple, increasingly assertive regions that compete and cooperate through governance capacity, technological innovation, and narrative control. Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual logic through which postcolonial restructuring, policy entrepreneurship, digital storytelling, and soft power interact to reshape destination competitiveness and visibility, resulting in an emerging multipolar global tourism order.

Reconfiguring Global Tourism Geographies

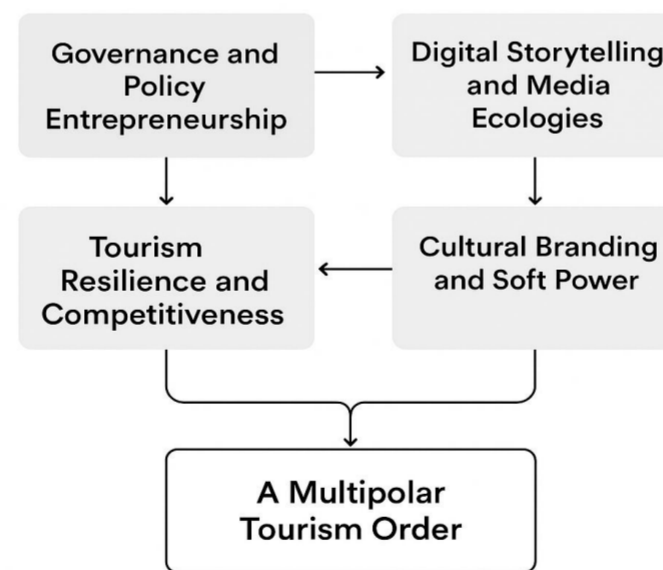


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven conceptual research design based on interpretive and comparative analysis of secondary sources. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the research develops a multi-regional and critical understanding of contemporary transformations in global tourism by systematically analyzing policy documents, destination branding strategies, media discourses, and academic literature. The objective is not statistical generalization but theoretical explanation of socio-political, cultural, and discursive shifts in tourism geographies across five macro-regions: Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas.



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A qualitative comparative conceptual design is particularly appropriate for examining abstract and relational phenomena such as digital visibility, soft power, national image-making, and tourism governance across diverse geopolitical contexts.

Table 1: Research Design and Analytical Strategy

Dimension	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative, theory-driven, comparative conceptual analysis
Epistemological Position	Interpretivist and critical, informed by postcolonial and cultural political economy perspectives
Research Objective	To examine how emerging and traditional destinations reposition themselves within changing global tourism hierarchies
Unit of Analysis	National and regional tourism systems across five macro-regions
Regions Covered	Europe, North America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East (with contextual references to Africa & Latin America)
Data Sources	Secondary data including academic literature, tourism policies, UNWTO reports, media narratives, destination branding materials, and digital platforms
Analytical Technique	Qualitative content analysis using deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (theme-emergent) coding
Core Analytical Dimensions	Governance & policy entrepreneurship; digital storytelling; soft power & destination identity; sustainability & resilience
Comparative Logic	Cross-regional thematic comparison rather than country-level statistical generalization
Expected Contribution	Conceptual advancement of a multipolar tourism framework integrating narrative sovereignty and institutional agility

Data Sources and Selection

The analysis draws exclusively on secondary data obtained from multiple authoritative and publicly available sources, including:

- National tourism policies and development strategies
- Scholarly literature in tourism studies, postcolonial theory, cultural geography, and media studies
- Reports published by international organizations such as UNWTO, World Bank, OECD, and global economic forums
- Digital tourism media, including official tourism board platforms, social media campaigns, travel blogs, and video-based content
- Media coverage related to tourism mega-events, destination repositioning, and national branding narratives

Country and document selection followed three criteria: (1) strategic relevance to tourism innovation and repositioning, (2) representation of both traditional and emerging tourism markets, and (3) availability and triangulation of high-quality secondary sources. Illustrative cases include conventional destinations (e.g., France, Italy, the United States) and emerging destinations (e.g., the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Turkey, and South Korea).

Analytical Approach

The study employs qualitative content analysis using a combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies. NVivo software was used to organize and code textual and visual materials. Deductive coding was informed by the theoretical framework, focusing on themes such as policy entrepreneurship, soft power, digital storytelling, and governance models. Inductive sub-themes emerged through iterative reading of policy texts, promotional materials, and media representations.

A comparative regional matrix was developed to identify patterns, divergences, and strategic orientations across regions. Key analytical dimensions included national tourism governance models, integration of digital technologies, cultural branding strategies, and post-COVID-19 narratives of sustainability and resilience. To enhance analytical rigor, triangulation was applied across academic, policy, and media sources. For digital content, visual semiotics, engagement indicators, and platform-specific affordances were considered where relevant.

Methodological Positioning and Limitations

The research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological orientation, emphasizing meaning-making through discourse, representation, and institutional context. While the study does not measure tourism outcomes quantitatively, it offers a theoretically informed and comparative interpretation of global tourism transformation.

Several limitations are acknowledged. The reliance on secondary data restricts access to real-time stakeholder perspectives, and interpretive analysis may reflect theoretical positioning despite mitigation through triangulation. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of global tourism may limit temporal generalizability. Nevertheless, the breadth of sources, depth of theoretical grounding, and cross-regional scope support the conceptual validity and relevance of the study.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary materials, formal ethical approval was not required. Ethical research practices were maintained through proper attribution of sources, careful contextualization of national and cultural narratives, and avoidance of reductive or essentialist representations. Reflexive attention was applied to geopolitical and cultural sensitivities in line with postcolonial research ethics.

Comparative Regional Analysis and Discussion

Global Tourism Reconfiguration: From West-Centric Dominance to Multipolar Dynamics

The comparative analysis reveals a clear reconfiguration of global tourism geographies from a historically Western-dominated system toward an increasingly multipolar structure (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Gutberlet, 2023). While Europe and North America continue to occupy significant positions in terms of absolute tourist arrivals and legacy brand equity, their dominance is no longer uncontested. Emerging destinations in Asia and the Middle East, and to a lesser extent parts of Africa and Latin America, are actively reshaping global tourism hierarchies through strategic governance, digital storytelling, and narrative repositioning (Farber et al., 2023; Rayya, 2025).

Rather than representing a simple redistribution of tourist flows, this transformation reflects deeper shifts in symbolic power, policy coordination, and media visibility (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Avraham, 2020). Tourism is no longer organized solely around inherited cultural capital or infrastructural maturity but increasingly around narrative agency, institutional agility, and the ability to align tourism with broader national and regional development visions (Dinnie, 2016; Kasemsarn et al., 2025). This section discusses these dynamics through a region-by-region comparative lens, followed by a cross-regional thematic synthesis.

Table 2: *Comparative Regional Tourism Repositioning Strategies*

Region	Governance Model	Branding Orientation	Digital Strategy	Sustainability Focus	Dominant Challenge
Europe	Bureaucratic, decentralized	Heritage-based, landmark-centric	Low-moderate; limited influencer use	Policy-driven sustainability	Overtourism, narrative fatigue
North America	Institutional, market-led	Legacy branding & entertainment media	Moderate; platform use without deep co-creation	Fragmented sustainability	Innovation inertia
East Asia	Highly coordinated, state-aligned	Cultural hybridity (tradition + futurism)	High; AI, AR/VR, smart tourism	Tech-enabled sustainability	Late reopening (COVID legacy)
Southeast Asia	Hybrid: state support + community-led	Experiential, grassroots storytelling	High; UGC & micro-influencers	Community-based ecotourism	Infrastructure gaps
Middle East	Centralized, vision-driven	Futurism + heritage + luxury	Very high; digital visas, AI marketing	Mega-project sustainability	Image credibility & scale risk

Europe: Heritage Saturation and Adaptive Constraints

European destinations remain globally iconic due to their dense concentration of cultural heritage, historical continuity, and established tourism infrastructure. Cities such as Venice, Paris, Barcelona, and Amsterdam continue to attract large volumes of international tourists. This very success has generated structural challenges, most notably overtourism, resident backlash, cultural fatigue, and policy rigidity (Rivera et al., 2021; Fusté-Forné & Michael, 2021).

The analysis indicates that many European destinations rely heavily on static heritage narratives and landmark-centered branding, offering limited narrative innovation or participatory storytelling (Safonov et al., 2024). While sustainability is frequently emphasized in policy discourse, implementation often lags demand pressures, resulting in regulatory responses that are reactive rather than transformative (Gutberlet, 2023). Digital adoption, particularly in the use of influencer-led storytelling, AI-driven personalization, and immersive media, remains uneven and comparatively limited. From a theoretical perspective, Europe illustrates the limits of legacy dominance in a rapidly evolving tourism ecosystem. High symbolic capital alone is no longer sufficient to sustain competitiveness without adaptive governance and narrative renewal.

In lots of instances, the tourism boards are stuck in the old models of branding that are centered on landmark oriented, packaged marketing (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). These have reduced innovation hence diminishing the adaptive capacity of Europe within the dynamically shifting tourism ecosystem (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Thereby, new destinations are taking advantage of these loopholes by creating inventive digital stories and flexibility of governance.



North America: Legacy Branding and Innovation Gaps

North American destinations, particularly in the United States and Canada, continue to benefit from strong global recognition, media influence, and diversified tourism products. Cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto remain globally visible, supported by cultural industries, entertainment media, and established destination marketing organizations.

However, the comparative analysis suggests that North American tourism branding remains largely top-down and institutionally driven. Although digital platforms are widely used, storytelling practices often lack grassroots engagement and participatory dynamics observed in Southeast Asia or the Middle East. Crisis recovery following COVID-19 was moderate but highlighted vulnerabilities related to fragmented governance, limited narrative co-creation, and uneven sustainability integration. In contrast to emerging regions, tourism in North America appears less strategically embedded within national development or soft power agendas, positioning it at a relative disadvantage in an era where tourism increasingly functions as a symbolic and geopolitical positioning (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Dinnie, 2016).

East Asia: Cultural Hybridity and Digital Sophistication

East Asian destinations demonstrate a highly coordinated and technologically advanced tourism model characterized by cultural hybridity, policy integration, and digital sophistication. Countries such as South Korea, Japan, and China exemplify a strategic fusion of heritage preservation with futurist narratives, supported by smart tourism infrastructure and media innovation (Yoon et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Tourism governance in East Asia is closely aligned with national development strategies, enabling coherent branding, rapid technological adoption, and consistent narrative framing (Zreik, 2024). Digital tools such as AI-driven visitor management, AR-enhanced heritage experiences, and platform-based engagement are integrated into destination strategies rather than treated as supplementary marketing tools.

From a comparative standpoint, East Asia represents a model of institutionalized adaptability, where tourism functions as both an economic sector and a cultural-political instrument embedded within broader modernization agendas (Rayya, 2025).

Southeast Asia: Grassroots Branding and Experiential Tourism

Southeast Asia presents a distinct model centered on grassroots storytelling, community-based tourism, and experiential authenticity. Destinations such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia rely heavily on micro-influencers, user-generated content, and culturally immersive experiences rather than large-scale mega-projects (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Noriah Ramli & Majdah Zawawi, 2021).

This bottom-up narrative strategy enables Southeast Asian destinations to cultivate emotional resonance and perceived authenticity, particularly among younger and post-pandemic travelers seeking meaningful, wellness-oriented, and culturally embedded experiences (Fizza Zubair & Mohd Farid Shamsudin, 2021; Farber et al., 2023). While infrastructural and technological capacity may be less advanced than in East Asia or the Middle East, the region compensates through high narrative flexibility and digital visibility.

The Southeast Asian model challenges the assumption that competitiveness requires large-scale capital investment, instead demonstrating the strategic value of participatory media ecosystems and community-led branding (Farber et al., 2023).

Middle East: Vision-Driven Rebranding and Soft Power Projection

The Middle East represents the most pronounced example of state-led tourism reconfiguration. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have positioned tourism as a central pillar of national transformation, economic diversification, and international image-building (Aldakhil, 2020; Rayya, 2025).

Mega-projects, global events, and digitally facilitated travel systems are deployed not only to attract visitors but to redefine national narratives (Toula et al., 2025). Tourism branding in the region strategically combines heritage, futurism, luxury, and openness, supported by aggressive digital marketing and policy coordination. Early post-COVID reopening, streamlined visa systems, and integrated digital platforms contributed to rapid recovery and heightened global visibility (Hajjaj et al., 2024).

In theoretical terms, the Middle East exemplifies tourism as soft power in action, where policy entrepreneurship, narrative sovereignty, and infrastructural spectacle converge to reposition destinations within global symbolic hierarchies (Dinnie, 2016; Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Table 3: *Narrative Sovereignty and Soft Power Orientation Across Regions*

Region	Narrative Control	Soft Power Mechanism	Media Strategy	Degree of Narrative Sovereignty
Europe	Institutionally centralized	Cultural heritage prestige	Traditional media & DMOs	Low–Moderate
North America	Corporate & institutional	Media dominance & entertainment	Hollywood & national DMOs	Moderate
East Asia	State–media synergy	Cultural exports & tech diplomacy	Integrated digital ecosystems	High
Southeast Asia	Decentralized, participatory	Cultural immersion & authenticity	Influencers & UGC	High
Middle East	State-led strategic storytelling	Mega-events & symbolic architecture	Global digital campaigns	Very High

Thematic Cross-Regional Synthesis

Digital Storytelling and Narrative Sovereignty

Emerging destinations demonstrate greater agility in leveraging digital platforms, influencer networks, and algorithmic visibility to construct participatory and emotionally resonant narratives (Kasemsarn et al., 2025; Obaidullah et al., 2024). Western destinations remain more reliant on institutional storytelling, limiting adaptability within rapidly evolving media ecosystems.

Policy Entrepreneurship and Governance

State-led, vision-driven governance models in East Asia and the Middle East enable strategic coordination and rapid innovation (Shao et al., 2021). Southeast Asia adopts a hybrid model combining state facilitation with community-led creativity, while Western regions display slower institutional responsiveness.

Sustainability and Infrastructure Integration

East Asia and the Middle East lead in integrating smart technologies and sustainability into tourism systems. Southeast Asia prioritizes ecological and cultural preservation through community-based approaches, whereas Europe and North America struggle to reconcile sustainability commitments with overtourism pressures (Gutberlet, 2023).

Table 4: *Sustainability and Smart Infrastructure Integration Patterns*

Region	Sustainability Strategy	Infrastructure Orientation	Governance Style	Resilience Outcome
Europe	Regulatory mitigation	Aging infrastructure	Reactive	Mixed
North America	Policy declarations	Uneven tech adoption	Fragmented	Moderate
East Asia	Smart sustainability	AI-driven cities & mobility	Strategic & integrated	High
Southeast Asia	Cultural & ecological preservation	Low-cost, community-based	Participatory	High (social)
Middle East	Green mega-projects	High-capital smart cities	Centralized	High (economic), mixed (social)

Discussion: Toward a Multipolar Tourism Order

Comparative analysis supports the proposition that global tourism is transitioning toward a multipolar order characterized by diversified centers of influence, narrative agencies, and policy innovation (Hall & Saarinen, 2022; Kyriakidis et al., 2024). Rather than replacing Western destinations, emerging regions are redistributing symbolic power and redefining what constitutes competitiveness in tourism.

Tourism increasingly operates as a discursive and political arena, where destinations compete through meaning-making, identity construction, and media visibility rather than infrastructure alone (Hall, 2020; Gretzel et al., 2020). This shift underscores the growing importance of narrative sovereignty, institutional agility, and digital co-creation in shaping the future geography of global tourism.

Discussion

Reinterpreting Global Tourism Through a Multipolar Lens

The findings of this study support the argument that global tourism is undergoing a structural and discursive transformation from a historically West-centric system toward a multipolar configuration. This shift does not imply the displacement of traditional tourism powers in Europe and North America, but rather a redistribution of symbolic influence, narrative control, and institutional agility across multiple regions. Emerging destinations in Asia and the Middle East, alongside selected parts of Africa and Latin America, are increasingly asserting themselves within global tourism hierarchies through strategic governance, digital storytelling, and cultural repositioning.



From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce postcolonial tourism scholarship by demonstrating how non-Western destinations are actively challenging inherited epistemic hierarchies. Tourism imaginaries are no longer exclusively shaped by Western media industries, legacy heritage narratives, or institutional marketing frameworks. Instead, they are being re-constructed through localized storytelling, platform-based visibility, and state-aligned branding strategies that foreground cultural hybridity, modernity, and regional identity.

Tourism as Discursive and Political Practice

The comparative analysis highlights that tourism today functions not merely as an economic activity but as a discursive and political practice. Destinations compete increasingly through meaning-making, narrative sovereignty, and symbolic representation rather than infrastructure alone. This is particularly evident in the Middle East and East Asia, where tourism is embedded within broader national development visions and soft power strategies. In these contexts, tourism serves as a vehicle for international image reconstruction, geopolitical signaling, and domestic modernization agendas.

In contrast, many European and North American destinations remain constrained by legacy branding models and institutional inertia. While they continue to attract large visitor volumes, their reliance on static heritage narratives and top-down marketing approaches limits adaptive capacity in a rapidly evolving digital media environment. Overtourism, resident resistance, and sustainability pressures further expose the limitations of regulatory responses that prioritize control over narrative renewal.

Digital Storytelling and Narrative Sovereignty

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in highlighting the growing importance of digital storytelling as a mechanism of destination power. Emerging regions demonstrate greater agility in leveraging influencer cultures, user-generated content, and algorithmic visibility to produce participatory and emotionally resonant tourism narratives. Southeast Asia, in particular, illustrates how community-led storytelling and experiential authenticity can generate global visibility without reliance on mega-projects or large-scale capital investment.

This decentralization of narrative control signals a broader shift in how tourism imaginaries are produced and circulated. Narrative sovereignty, understood as the ability of destinations to represent themselves on their own terms, emerges as a critical dimension of contemporary tourism competitiveness. Western destinations, by contrast, appear slower to adapt to these participatory media dynamics, remaining anchored in centralized promotional models that resonate less strongly with digitally native and post-pandemic travelers.

Toward a Multipolar Tourism Order

Taken together, the findings substantiate the proposition that global tourism is evolving toward a multipolar order characterized by diverse centers of influence, differentiated governance models, and plural narrative regimes. This transformation is qualitative rather than purely quantitative. It reflects changes in how destinations are imagined, governed, and mediated, rather than simply shifts in tourist arrival numbers or market shares.

The multipolar tourism order identified in this study underscores the need to rethink established assumptions about competitiveness, authenticity, and sustainability. It suggests that future tourism dynamics will be shaped less by historical dominance and more by institutional flexibility, digital co-creation, and the capacity to align tourism with broader cultural and political projects.

Implications

Policy Implications

For policymakers, the findings highlight that tourism can no longer be treated as a peripheral economic sector. Instead, it should be understood as a strategic component of national development, international positioning, and cultural diplomacy. Emerging destinations demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating tourism within long-term national visions, coordinated governance frameworks, and digital infrastructure planning.

Traditional destinations may benefit from shifting away from purely regulatory responses to overtourism toward more adaptive strategies that emphasize narrative diversification, visitor dispersion, and participatory branding. Investment in smart tourism systems, digital governance, and platform-based engagement can enhance both sustainability outcomes and visitor experience without undermining cultural integrity.



Implications for Industry and Destination Management

For tourism practitioners and destination management organizations, the study underscores the growing importance of participatory branding and experiential design. Destinations that engage local communities, creators, and cultural actors in storytelling processes are better positioned to build emotional resonance, perceived authenticity, and long-term brand relevance.

The findings also suggest that competitiveness increasingly depends on experience design rather than product provision. Interactive cultural encounters, wellness-oriented tourism, and digitally mediated heritage experiences offer pathways to differentiation in saturated markets. Sustainability should be approached not as an add-on but as an embedded strategy encompassing environmental responsibility, community inclusion, and ethical representation.

Implications for Academic Research

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the de-centering of Western-centric tourism models and calls for greater attention to regionalized theorization. Tourism research would benefit from moving beyond universalized frameworks toward context-sensitive analyses that account for governance structures, media ecologies, and postcolonial histories.

The findings also point to the need for deeper engagement with digital power in tourism studies, including the role of algorithms, influencer economies, and platform governance in shaping destination visibility. Future research may build on this conceptual framework through empirical investigations, mixed-method designs, and longitudinal studies that examine how narrative sovereignty and policy entrepreneurship influence destination resilience and trust over time.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its conceptual and comparative contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, including policy documents, institutional reports, academic literature, and media materials. While this approach allows for broad cross-regional comparison and theoretical synthesis, it limits the ability to capture real-time stakeholder perspectives, tourist behavior, and destination-level micro-dynamics. The absence of primary empirical data restricts direct validation of how narratives, governance strategies, and digital branding are perceived and experienced on the ground.

Second, the comparative scope of the study, although analytically valuable, necessarily involves a trade-off between breadth and depth. By focusing on macro-regions rather than detailed country- or city-level case studies, the analysis may underrepresent intra-regional diversity and contextual variation, particularly within Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Tourism governance and branding strategies often differ substantially within regions, and these nuances warrant closer examination.

Third, the study is temporally bounded within a rapidly evolving post-pandemic tourism landscape. Many digital branding initiatives, policy reforms, and sustainability strategies discussed here are still unfolding, and their long-term impacts on destination competitiveness and resilience remain uncertain. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

Future research could address these limitations through mixed-method designs that combine comparative policy analysis with qualitative interviews, visitor surveys, and digital ethnographies of influencer networks and user-generated content. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in assessing how narrative sovereignty and digital storytelling influence destination image, trust, and repeat visitation over time. Additionally, more granular case studies at sub-national or community levels—especially in under-represented regions—would deepen understanding of how global tourism transformations are locally negotiated and experienced.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ongoing reconfiguration of global tourism from a historically West-centric system toward a more multipolar and diversified order. By adopting a comparative, theory-informed perspective, the paper demonstrates that contemporary tourism competitiveness is no longer determined solely by inherited cultural capital or infrastructural maturity. Instead, it increasingly depends on narrative agency, policy entrepreneurship, digital visibility, and the strategic alignment of tourism with broader national and regional development agendas.

The findings highlight how emerging destinations—particularly in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East—are actively reshaping global tourism hierarchies through innovative governance models, participatory digital storytelling, and soft power-oriented branding strategies. At the same time, traditional Western destinations continue to face structural challenges related to overtourism, policy inertia, and limited narrative renewal, despite maintaining strong global recognition. Rather than suggesting a displacement of established tourism centers, the study points to a redistribution of symbolic power and representational authority within global tourism. This shift reflects a



broader transformation in how destinations construct meaning, legitimacy, and desirability in an increasingly digital and post-pandemic world. Tourism thus emerges not merely as an economic sector, but as a strategic arena of cultural diplomacy, identity formation, and geopolitical positioning.

By integrating postcolonial perspectives with insights from policy studies, media research, and tourism governance, this paper contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of global tourism transformation. It invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to reconsider dominant assumptions about tourism development and to recognize the growing importance of narrative sovereignty, institutional adaptability, and inclusive representation in shaping the future geography of tourism.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and digital content. No human participants, personal data, or confidential information were involved. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research or its findings.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptualization, literature review, analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

No primary data were generated or analyzed during this study. All sources used are publicly available and appropriately cited within the manuscript.

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