



# Encountering the “Other”

Exploring local residents’ perceptions and attitudes towards rural tourism in Sanitar, Nepal

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## Abstract

Tourism in Nepal is highly dynamic and complex. While nationally Nepal has a prosperous tourism industry, it also faces challenges such as mass tourism and the degradation of natural resources. This thesis investigates local residents' perceptions and attitudes towards tourists, the Nepalese tourism industry and the future of tourism in the rural village of Sanitar. Furthermore, the thesis explores what factors motivate local residents' involvement in tourism. Located in the Mid-Hill region, Sanitar has had little tourism activity prior to the recent opening of a homestay in the village. The homestay has started to generate a more regular influx of tourists, creating an opportunity for more local involvement within the industry. Based on two weeks of fieldwork in Sanitar using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and participatory observation, we found that there was an overwhelmingly positive perception of tourism. We suggest that this positive perception is influenced by the economic status of local residents and imaginaries of the power of whiteness to facilitate change. We argue that the findings are rooted in indirect reproductions of colonial discourses. Furthermore, the research found that local residents had a desire to share their culture with tourists, raising questions about the balance between economic profit from cultural-based tourism and the authentic long-term preservation of culture.

*Keywords:* Tourism, Nepal, Glocalisation, Tourism imaginary, Colonial discourses, Whiteness

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# 1. Introduction

Nepal, a country of spectacular landscapes, rich culture, and fascinating history, has interested us throughout our years at university. This interest peaked when listening to podcasts, watching documentaries, and reading articles about the country's thriving tourism industry, the challenges it faces, and the efforts being made to navigate these challenges. After watching the documentary "14 Peaks" on Netflix, we came to realise that the voices of locals are often marginalised in discussions concerning tourism, highlighting the importance of understanding their perspectives and experiences regarding tourists visiting their country. Studies show that local residents' in Nepal are indirectly and directly affected by tourists and the effects of tourism, both on their communities, values, behaviour and life-style (Upadhaya et al. 2022). Therefore, we would like to emphasise the significance of local perspectives in shaping the trajectory of tourism in Nepal. The country is considered a coveted tourist destination, welcoming more than 1 million tourists in 2023 (Prasain 2023). Tourism has been an important industry within the Nepalese economy for centuries. The expansion of this industry is therefore of interest to the Nepalese government as well as to tourism operators and local people (Bhandari 2022). However, recent discussions about Nepal have been dominated by the issue of how to tackle the challenge of meeting tourists' demands while, at the same time, conserving the country's natural resources and cultural heritage (Sanjay 2022). A previously established contact in Nepal, who is working with sustainable, ethical tourism, informed us of her newly opened homestay in Sanitar, a rural village located in the Mid-Hill region of Nepal with little previous tourism activity. The establishment of the homestay in Sanitar creates an opportunity for the village to accommodate tourists on a more regular basis. Hence, the village of Sanitar is undergoing a transition to become a new travel destination. Previous scholars have written about the impact of tourism on destinations and local residents, such as the damage to natural resources (Gyan & Thapa 2010) and the impact on the quality of life of local communities (Upadhaya et al. 2022). Less has been written about local residents' perceptions of tourism and the underlying reasons for individuals becoming involved in the tourism industry, especially in areas with little tourism. Hence, the homestay in Sanitar provided an excellent opportunity to explore the mechanisms of tourism from a local perspective, which we believe has received less attention in research literature and media. For the purpose of gathering information on this subject, we travelled to the village of Sanitar to interview local people on their attitudes regarding tourism.

## 1.1 Problem statement

With the recent opening of the homestay in Sanitar, the village is entering a new reality of encountering tourists on a more frequent basis. Homestay tourism is based around tourists living with local people in their homes (Kafle 2023). This has been described as a more sustainable form of tourism in comparison to conventional tourism, as it promotes rural community development and minimises the environmental damage commonly associated with large-scale tourism infrastructure (Kafle 2023). Homestay tourism, however, does not necessarily reduce the environmental risks associated with tourism (ibid.) or minimise the impact on the local community (Udpadhaya et al. 2022). Depending on various factors involved, previous studies on tourism highlight that the negative impact on the destination and its people may outweigh the positive aspects of rural tourism, resulting in social and/or economic difficulties (Kafle 2022). The negative impact of tourism in Nepal has been seen in the mountainous regions, causing environmental issues (Gyan & Thapa 2010). In protected natural areas, there are problems with litter, overcrowding, waste, and deforestation (ibid.).

Tourism is viewed as a force and a result of globalisation as it involves a global flow of people, ideas, and interconnecting cultures (Stiubea 2020). Existing research on globalisation often highlights its tendency to homogenise cultures, raising concerns about the gradual disappearance of local cultural identities and their replacement with Western cultures (Ziyan 2023). One solution to counteract this tendency, and which is widely seen in Nepal, is cultural tourism - where tourists can learn and participate in cultural activities (ibid.). Cultural tourism is closely related to homestay tourism as it creates an opportunity for tourists to engage in local cultural activities (Kafle 2023). Cultural tourism is, however, a two way interaction, as tourists introduce some of their own culture to the locals in the tourist destination in terms of values, cultural practices, and ideas of modernity (Jepson & Sharpley 2013). Researchers argue that cultural tourism could have potential negative consequences for the culture in question that outweighs the positive aspects of introducing local culture to tourists (Dewayanti & Raafigani 2016).

Despite the negative consequences and effects of tourism mentioned above, the industry involves over a million people in Nepal (Bhandari 2022) and plays a vital role in providing income opportunities to the population. This indicates that there must be elements of the industry that attract people to engage in it.

## 1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to examine local residents' perceptions and involvement in the tourism industry in rural areas of Nepal, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the tourism sphere in Nepal. Our research questions are:

- What are the perceptions of local residents with regard to shaping the future of tourism in Sanitar, Nepal?
- What are the attitudes of local residents towards tourists in Sanitar, Nepal?
- What factors drive local people to engage with tourism in Nepal?

In order to make these questions researchable, we conducted a field study in Sanitar, Nepal in April 2024. We believe that the case of Sanitar can serve as an example of broader mechanisms operating in Nepalese rural tourism. Furthermore, the field study provides insights that extend beyond Sanitar and contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamics within rural tourism in Nepal.

The thesis layout is as follows: The Background introduces relevant information about tourism and the phenomenon of Homestays, finishing with a segment about the village of Sanitar, where the study was conducted. The Method includes detailed information on the conducted interviews, the selection of geographic location and the study's delimitations and limitations. The Method also addresses ethical considerations and the potential impact of researching tourism whilst being viewed as a tourist. The Conceptual Framework clarifies and defines the concepts later used to analyse the material gathered via interviews and observations in the village. The Results and Discussion includes an analysis of our material, categorised using three sub-headings: Perceptions of Tourism and Their Link to Economic Status, The Power of the "Other" to Develop, and The Future of Tourism in Sanitar. The sub-headings outline the main findings of our study, covering, respectively, the link between local perceptions of tourism and economic status; indirect reproductions of colonial discourses; and desires for cultural revival. The Conclusion includes a summary of our main findings and ideas for future research projects.



## 2. Background

### 2.1 Global tourism

Tourism is a worldwide phenomenon and an enormous industry that has been recognised as a key driver of economic growth and economic recovery by the International Monetary Fund, IMF (UNWTO 2023). Over the past 70 years, the international tourism sector has seen a large increase in tourist arrivals, ranging from 25 million in 1950 to 1.5 billion in 2019 (UNWTO n.d). The impact of tourism is both positive and negative as it has significant effects on economies, the natural environment, and societies, as well as cultures all over the world (Westcott & Anderson 2021).

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the number of international tourists in the world briefly declined between 2008 and 2021, but has since then risen again (Bhandari 2022). Nepal, on the other hand, has experienced a steady increase in the number of tourists, from 150,000 visitors in 2010 to 1 million visitors in 2023 (Swiss Nepal Chamber of Commerce 2023).

#### 2.1.1 Tourism in Nepal

For centuries, Nepal has been considered a sought-after tourist destination (Bhandari 2022). This is partly due to its importance in Buddhist and Hindu religions, as it is the birthplace of both Buddha and Sita (ibid.). Between 1846 and 1951, Nepal was ruled by the Rana family, establishing the so-called Rana dynasty (Britannica n.d). During this era, international visitors were prohibited from entering the country (Bhandari 2022). After the fall of the dynasty, the democratically elected government acknowledged tourism's essential role in national development (ibid.). The tourism industry gradually began to flourish, attracting visitors from all over the world (Bhandari 2022).

Tourism has since been recognised as a highly profitable industry by the Nepalese government (Bhandari 2022). Currently, over one million people are thought to be involved in the Nepalese tourism industry (ibid.). Bhandari (2022) notes that the

Nepalese government has created several policies to promote sustainable tourism practices, create more job opportunities, and improve the quality of Nepalese tourism. The government's policies and involvement in the industry have, however, been criticised in recent years by local stakeholders who claim the government isn't doing enough in creating opportunities to develop sustainable tourism ventures (Bhandari 2022).

As mentioned above, tourism in Nepal has been of historical importance and remains important today. Tourism contributes to Nepal's economy in terms of employment and revenue (Swiss Nepal Chamber of Commerce 2023), and directly contributes 6.7% to Nepal's GDP (World Bank 2022).

According to the government of Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d), the country is best known for having the world's highest mountains, and also for its religious and cultural sites. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) claims that the majority of tourists visiting Nepal come for its natural resources, including protected areas such as wildlife parks, national parks, and hunting reserves (UNDP n.d.).

### 2.1.2 The emergence of Nepalese Homestays

Homestays are a form of tourist accommodation, where tourists pay to live with local people in their homes (Kafle 2023). The homestay arrangements can vary, but food is commonly included in the price (ibid.). Furthermore, Kafle (2023) writes that hosts commonly offer tourists the opportunity to participate in traditional activities, allowing them to learn about and engage with the local culture. In addition, he remarks that homestays are regarded as an alternative to establishing conventional hotels in rural areas. The concept of homestays has been shown to have a significant impact on rural tourism globally, encouraging the consumption of local products and services (Kafle 2023).

Nepalese culture has a long tradition of treating visitors with hospitality, respect and honour (Kafle 2023). The concept of homestays creates an opportunity for such cultural traditions to be applied within the tourism and hospitality industry (ibid.). According to Kafle (2023), Nepalese homestays, both privately and publicly owned, first emerged in 1997, when 37 households established homestays in the Syangja district with the help of British citizen Tony Park. The homestays came to play a fundamental role in Nepalese rural tourism and the concept has since gained popularity nationwide (ibid). In 2010, the Nepalese Government created a policy called "Homestay Operation Code of Conduct 2010" that officially defined the characteristics of a homestay and clarified which tourism ventures have the right to

call themselves one (ibid.). The number of Nepalese communities currently offering homestay accommodation amounts to over 500, and today homestays are the foundation of an official Nepalese policy for developing rural tourism (Kafle 2023).

## 2.2 The village of Sanitar

In this section we describe the village of Sanitar. Due to a lack of official documents containing data and information about the village, we have had to rely on personal observations, verbal sources, and estimates.

The geographical area to which this field study is delimited is located in Nepal, Dolakha district, and Baiteswor municipality no. 2. The village of Sanitar is located in the Mid-Hill region, which accounts for 43% of the total land area in Nepal (FAO n.d). The Mid-Hill region is characterised by various climate types, ranging from subtropical to very cold (FAO n.d). The region includes some of the most fertile land in the country, despite having valleys at heights of 1000m and peaks reaching altitudes slightly above 3000m (ibid). Sanitar is located on a slope in a valley surrounded by jungle. The village of Sanitar, in common with many villages in Nepal, is prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, floods and droughts (Mercy Corps n.d.). An example of this was the earthquake known as the Gorkha earthquake, which registered a magnitude of 7.8 and devastated Nepal in 2015, damaging 600,000 structures and killing 9,000 people (Rafferty 2024). According to our respondents, all the houses in the village were destroyed by the Gorkha earthquake.



*Figure 1: Main pedestrian path and houses in Sanitar*

Sanitar is a small village with approximately 80 households located within close proximity of each other. Based on what our participants have told us, everyone in the village belongs to an ethnic group called Tamang. Accounting for 5.5% of the Nepalese population, Tamang is one of over 61 ethnic groups in Nepal (Tamang 2003). It is a Tibeto-Burmese-speaking ethnic group, thought to have originated in Tibet many centuries ago (ibid).

Sanitar's first shop opened in the beginning of 2024 and supplies the community with household essentials, snacks, and drinks. The closest larger shops are found in Mirge, a small town approximately 20 minutes walk from Sanitar. Mirge has barbershops, a small grocery store, tailors, and a restaurant. Despite having more amenities, the supply of goods in Mirge is very limited and the best option for buying groceries, fresh fruits, and vegetables is in the larger town of Charikot. Charikot is located 1.5 hours away by car or bus from Sanitar. There are no schools in Sanitar but several are located within walking distance of the village.

The majority of the households in Sanitar have land and the possibility of growing crops, either for household consumption or for selling. The majority of the households also keep livestock such as goats and buffaloes for milk and meat. Every household is involved in agricultural activities in one way or another. Based on our observations, local women commonly stay at home during the day to take care of the children and work in the field, while their husbands are away on treks or other work. This being said, some women work as teachers at the local schools. When we were in Sanitar, all the children and teachers had a two week holiday between their school semesters. This meant that the daily routines in the village were a bit different from normal.

All the local residents own a house but the standard of housing varies, ranging from mud houses to concrete houses. Since the earthquake in 2015, most houses have tin roofs. Based on what we have been told, every household has access to electricity and water. The water is supplied through a pipe system connected to each household's garden hose.

Participants have informed us that the majority of households in Sanitar have a connection or previous experience with tourism, mainly within the trekking industry. We do not have sufficient information to confirm whether this is unique to Sanitar or if this is a common occurrence in the whole of Nepal. The participants have told us that this is, however, unique in the municipality.



*Figure 2: Sanitar from above*

As mentioned previously, Sanitar has, up until recently, welcomed and hosted very few tourists. Since the establishment of the new homestay a few months ago, tourists are visiting Sanitar on a more regular basis. The majority of the tourists staying at the homestay visit Sanitar after a trek for a few days of recovery.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research selection and delimitation

The choice of geographic location for our study was determined by a previously established contact in Nepal who had recently opened a homestay in Sanitar. We contacted this person prior to our arrival in Nepal and suggested potential topics that we wanted to investigate. Our contact, with a great understanding of the local context, helped us identify which topics and issues could be of relevance to the local population and tourism industry. Due to our limited knowledge of the Nepalese context, we needed assistance in understanding what is relevant, current, and important to research. After finding a relevant area of research, our contact suggested studying tourism in Sanitar due to the recent establishment of their homestay, enabling a more consistent influx of tourists. This was suggested not only because it would be an interesting and relevant topic for us to explore, but also because our contact is an advocate for ethical, sustainable and minimal impact travel, and so had an interest in learning more about the locals' attitudes towards the homestay and the expectations of tourism in the area. Despite our contact, a tourism operator, offering us the opportunity to conduct research on tourism in Sanitar, our research is independent from the interests of our contact. We did not write our research questions or design the study based on the contact's request, although we did gather ideas about relevant topics and issues from them.

As previously mentioned, we chose to limit the geographical area to Sanitar, because our contact had connections in the village. This means that our findings are limited to the village of Sanitar which is a unique context. The results may, therefore, be difficult to generalise to the country as a whole, but according to Harboe (2013), one way to examine the validity of the study is to use conceptual frameworks to compare our findings, something which we have done. However, we believe that some overall findings may be of relevance in other areas.

## 3.2 Being a tourist and conducting research

In the process of interviewing local residents and collecting data, we stayed at the homestay that our research revolves around. Residents in Sanitar therefore regarded us as tourists for the entirety of our stay. In the initial planning phase of the field study, the idea was to collect information through interviews only. After arriving in Sanitar and starting the research process, it became apparent that the locals' assumption that we were tourists would affect our results. A recurring example of this is that many times respondents mentioned that they would like to marry a tourist, and later on asked us if we would like to marry them. While this semi-joke partially illustrates their perception of tourism and tourists, which we will explore later in the results, our interpretation of this situation is that we ourselves were viewed as tourists or visitors.

## 3.3 Interviews

The material for this thesis was collected through interviews with residents living in Sanitar, Dolakha district in Nepal. Over a two week period, 14 interviews were conducted with a total of 21 people. The people interviewed were aged between 18-80 years old. A total of 5 men and 16 women were interviewed. We selected respondents with the aim of interviewing a variety of genders and ages, but were limited to those who were available at the time and who lived in different areas of the village so that we could cover as broad a geographic area as possible. In order to successfully conduct our interviews we employed a translator via our previously established contact. Our translator spoke the local language Tamang, as well as Nepali, English, and Swedish, which meant that we were not restricted to choosing respondents based on their English language skills.

The interview style was semi-structured, meaning that we created themes in advance to provide the direction in which we wanted the interview to proceed (Bryman 2002). Furthermore, it made room for flexibility, allowing us to adjust and redefine the interview questions based on the respondents' answers (ibid.). The semi-structured interview approach enabled us to follow up on interesting answers and explore new ideas that arose during the interviews (ibid.). At the beginning of the field study, we focused on sustainable destination development and what people saw as challenges with tourism. As the study went on, we realised that this had little relevance in the village, causing us to change our initial direction to focus on attitudes towards tourists and motives behind the involvement in tourism.

All the interviews were conducted by both of us and our translator, allowing one of us to ask the questions and choose the direction of the interview while the other

took notes. After each interview, we rotated roles. None of the interviews were recorded due to the fact that many of the respondents were not comfortable with us doing so. Furthermore, many of the respondents did not perceive their answers as important enough or themselves as intelligent enough to be recorded. Despite this, we informed them of our interest in hearing their own thoughts and opinions. We also assured them of confidentiality. We took notes in notepads during the interviews, and processed the material afterwards together with our translator. This ensured that we didn't miss anything and understood the answers correctly. Finally, we transferred the notes to our computers for further analysis.

### 3.4 Research limitation

We chose to stay in the village Sanitar for two weeks because that was the time available to us given the limited time we had to finish the thesis. Initially, we had considered comparing Sanitar with another village in Nepal, but time and budget limitations meant that we decided to focus solely on Sanitar.

Our translator was originally from Sanitar but has spent most of her adult life in Kathmandu and Sweden. As mentioned above, our translator spoke English, Swedish, Nepali, and Tamang, and the interviews were conducted using all four languages. Using a translator with connections to Sanitar had both advantages and disadvantages. She shared valuable information with us regarding family constellations, religion, cultural norms, and other practical information. This helped increase our knowledge of the area and gave us valuable perspectives. However, it could be argued that the use of a local translator, to whom many participants were related, strongly influenced the context of the interviews and the participants' answers (Josselson 2013). Furthermore, the translator risked hearing intimate details about their relatives' lives, which the translator then needed to manage after the interview (ibid.).

Other research limitations were the cultural and language barriers, and response biases, as well as interviewer and interviewee subjectivity. Despite having a translator, some words and concepts can be difficult to directly translate. Examples of such are “sustainability” and “challenge”. The difficulty of directly translating these words required our translator to create definitions using other words or synonyms in order to make the respondent understand. This could have resulted in the respondent perceiving the questions slightly differently to that which we intended. In order to minimise this possibility, we discussed the interview and the translations of questions with our translator after each interview. This gave us the opportunity to understand how she had explained the questions we asked to the



respondents, and so to better understand the precise questions to which they were answering.

Cultural barriers, such as the underlying values or cultural nuances of both the interviewer and respondents can influence the quality of the results (Sands et al. 2007). Apart from leading to misinterpretation, cross-cultural interviewing can cause discomfort and offence due to a lack of cultural competence (ibid.). Response biases, when respondents provide answers that they think are socially desirable, are yet another limitation that can influence the validity of the results (Smith 2014). Everyone we interviewed had a positive attitude towards tourism and we can not tell if this stated attitude was influenced by the fact that we were viewed as tourists, or if that is how the respondents genuinely felt.

The potential influence of the respondent's and interviewer's perspectives, past experiences and biases during the interview need to be considered when interpreting responses and analysing the results. During our research it became apparent that we had other perspectives, especially concerning values, culture and norms, than those of our participants. Furthermore, we felt glorified by the locals who repeatedly told us that we looked beautiful in our white skin, were much more intelligent than them, and came from a richer society. This made us feel slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable. Such comments indicate a potential power imbalance between us and our participants, and the discomfort we felt pushed us to further investigate what underlies these comments. The power imbalance is a research limitation that could affect the validity and quality of the participants' answers and our results. However, our awareness of the power imbalance gave us new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the materials we gathered.

### 3.5 Ethics and reflexivity

According to the Swedish Research Council (2002), there are four main ethical principles that need to be considered when conducting research within the fields of social science and humanities. The principle of information implies that the researcher informs the participants about the aim of the study (ibid.). The principle of consent highlights the participants' right to choose whether or not they want to participate in the study (ibid.). The principle of confidentiality states that all information about the participants should be confidential and exclusively accessed by those who have been authorised to view it (ibid.). The final principle, the principle of utilisation, implies that information about individuals should only be used for the purpose of research (Swedish Research Council 2002).

Throughout the field study in Nepal, all four ethical principles were thoroughly practised and taken into account. Our translator informed our interviewees about the research objective and their rights prior to the interview. All interviewees gave us oral consent to include their answers in the study and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Throughout the study, it became clear that confidentiality was of great importance considering that all interviews were conducted within a small community. During the interviews, some respondents asked us to keep certain pieces of information off the record out of fear of causing conflict within the village. Furthermore, our translator informed us that some information was being withheld from us for similar reasons. With this in mind, anonymity and confidentiality was practised thoroughly throughout the study, with the aim of protecting sensitive information. For this reason, we have chosen to only incorporate information regarding approximate age, place and year when referencing to interviews. All personal information has been kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of research.

We want to highlight that throughout the fieldwork, we conducted the research with openness, honesty and reflexivity. We are sensitive to the issue that our intention was to conduct an independent project, but are fully aware of, and wish to be transparent about, the fact that we were paying customers at the homestay our research was centred around. Lastly, we want to emphasise that the way in which we present our findings here was not impacted by the opinions of the owner of the homestay.

## 4. The conceptual framework

In this following segment we will examine the concepts from which we have drawn insights when analysing the material we gathered from our interviews. In order to understand the interactions of the local and global in which tourism operates, we draw on the concept of ‘glocalisation’ (Soulard & Salazar 2022). We use the concept of ‘tourism imaginaries’ to more deeply understand the local residents’ perceptions of tourists and how it has evolved.. The concept of ‘tourism imaginaries’ used in this study is based on Salazar’s description in *Tourism imaginaries: a conceptual approach* (2011). In order to further discuss the perceptions and imaginaries of local residents, we believe it is important to understand the relationship between tourism and whiteness. We also investigate how an indirect reproduction of a colonial discourse affects the tourism sphere and the local imaginaries of tourists. Lastly, we discuss the concept of ‘cultural commodification’, to raise concerns about how culture in cultural tourism can be sold as a commodity and the resulting impact on the local community and the long term conservation of culture.

### 4.1 Glocalisation

Glocalisation is a conceptual framework that emerged in response to the concept of globalisation (Soulard & Salazar 2022). Globalisation has been criticised for depicting the world as a one-way cultural exchange, in which the whole world is becoming Westernised, threatening cultural diversity as a result (ibid.). Authors Soulard and Salazar highlight that while globalisation does create conflicts and tension, it can also encourage individuals to travel, meet people from other cultures, and promote interactions between tourists and residents of travel destinations. Furthermore, they argue that such interactions can expand the residents' connections and engagement with the world beyond their own geographic boundaries. It can also foster meaningful interactions that ultimately contribute to increased global awareness of tourism sites. With this more positive view in mind, the concept of glocalisation was created (Soulard & Salazar 2022).

Glocalisation involves the interconnection of global and local cultural exchanges that promote dynamic changes around the world (Salazar 2010). The setting in

which globalisation is executed is always a locality, and the local is reproduced in a global flow of discourses, imaginaries, and products (ibid). Hence, the local and the global are not two separate entities but rather co-exist as one (Salazar 2010).

Salazar and Soulard (2022) address the relevance of glocalisation within the tourism industry, referring to the large increase in international tourists, which in turn has created more opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. Glocalised services aim to fulfil the tourists' desires to live authentically and inclusively at the travel destination (ibid.). Glocalisation can then be used as a conceptual lens when analysing tourism experiences, and the social and cultural exchange happening within such experiences (Soulard & Salazar 2022).

According to the authors, glocalisation mirrors the analytical framework of transformative tourism (Soulard & Salazar 2022). Transformative tourism seeks to educate tourists, encourage reflection and cross-cultural interactions, and teach tourists about the value of cultural differences (ibid.). Together, both frameworks aim to broaden the mindset of people and encourage cultural awareness. By using glocalisation strategies, such as the implementation of cultural codes, tourism businesses can differentiate themselves. Moreover, Soulard and Salazar highlight the potential that glocalisation strategies have in the facilitation of cross-community projects. By de-emphasising the importance of national borders, these strategies foster a sense of interconnectedness and cooperation among diverse communities within and across regions (Soulard & Salazar 2022).

Transformative tourism businesses practising glocalisation strategies heavily rely on partnerships with destination residents who can offer tourists authentic experiences (Soulard & Salazar 2022). Such partnerships are also beneficial for the community as they can generate more local profit (ibid.). Furthermore, such practices can empower local residents to develop more intimate and meaningful relationships with tourists. They state that it has been shown that tourists participating in sustainable guided tours in Nepal are more likely to behave respectfully towards local cultures and contribute to the community economy by buying local products. Businesses and tour guides who offer authentic glocalised experiences, such as sustainable guided tours, have the opportunity to encourage transformative thinking and cultural understanding (Soulard & Salazar 2022).

## 4.2 Tourism imaginaries

In his article on Tourism imaginaries, Salazar (2011) describes the concept of imaginaries and their influence on the international tourism industry. Salazar conceptualises imaginaries by describing them as “socially transmitted

representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices." (ibid.). Imaginaries can, in other words, influence an individual's understanding of their own identity and perceived place in society. In Salazar's work, he points out that imaginaries are, however, created not solely from unidirectional ideas nor are they solely shaped by tourism, but arise as a consequence of the fusion of several ideas and practices. Furthermore, he highlights that the concept not only encompasses the process of meaning-making, but also the result that such a process can provoke (2011).

Salazar (2011) argues that there is a strong link between tourism and imaginaries, claiming that Western tourism imaginaries have a tendency to promote stereotypes based on colonial myths of "Otherness" and fantasies (ibid.). Such imaginaries tend to emphasise the power of the "Other" while failing to highlight the power of commonality. Dichotomies, such as here-there and local-global, influence the construction of imaginaries. Other triggering mechanisms are economics and politics (Salazar 2011).

Some imaginaries are adopted by groups or whole communities (Salazar 2011). Such imaginaries are, in Salazar's research, called "shared imaginaries" and are defined as collective beliefs and narratives that are accepted and practised within a community or particular group. Although imaginaries can impact collective behaviour, Salazar points out that it is the individual who imagines, rather than society itself (2011).

Globalisation plays an important role in the reproduction and creation of imaginaries (Salazar 2011). Global media streams constantly distribute impressions of the world, commonly depicting the Global South negatively (ibid.). Although such media streams could be held accountable for creating and drawing attention to certain tourist imaginaries, Salazar highlights that such imaginaries are primarily constructed by the local people, mediators, and the tourists themselves (Salazar 2022).

Researchers within the field and within tourism practices fail to recognise the interconnectedness between imaginaries and multileveled institutions of power (Salazar 2011). This hinders their ability to understand the hidden forces which result in certain tourism practices and imaginings being restricted, while others are not (ibid.). Furthermore, Salazar writes that this lack of understanding challenges the identification of rising authorities of power within the tourism sphere (Salazar 2011).

Despite Salazar's article focusing on Western tourism imaginaries of cultures in the Global South, he points out that similar analyses can be conducted using imaginaries of the Western world created by non-westerners (2011). In this thesis, we have chosen to analyse the imaginaries of residents in Nepal towards international tourism.

### 4.3 Indirect reproduction of colonial discourses

The following concept is based on research conducted by Katarina Mattsson, an associate professor at Södertörn University in Sweden (Södertörns Högskola n.d.). Mattsson has conducted research in the field of gender studies and critical whiteness studies (ibid.). In the chapter *Tourism, whiteness and colonial continuity* written by Mattsson (2023), she highlights that in the international tourism context, tourists are often described as having a neutral position (Mattsson 2023). Katarina Mattsson criticises this by arguing that such a belief neglects the implicit assumption of whiteness (ibid.). Furthermore, Mattsson argues that whiteness and tourism have a close relationship, and that whiteness within the tourism sphere plays a significant role that can be described as a silent norm. Touristic whiteness, as described by Mattsson, is imbued by traces of colonial continuity in different forms within the tourism domain: both in the historical tradition of travelling to and exploring former colonies, and in an indirect reproduction of colonial discourses, subjectivities, and travel styles. Despite this, whiteness in the tourism sphere has only recently been addressed (Mattsson 2023).

The institutionalisation of voluntourism, tourism involving unpaid voluntary work, has made such travelling increasingly accessible for young, white Westerners over the past decades (Mattsson 2023). Her research points out that white people commonly perceive such experiences as opportunities to “make a difference” and contribute to positive development in vulnerable communities (ibid.). Furthermore, it is viewed as a way of improving language skills and gaining work experience. Mattsson argues that voluntourism reproduces beliefs that the “Third World” is poverty-stricken, characterised by hopelessness and suffering. This creates the assumption that such places require external aid and that white Westerners are more capable of successfully developing the “Third World” than the people it is inhabited by. Mattsson argues that such behaviour reproduces the colonial tradition of going on “civilising missions”. The notion of white Westerners developing and “rescuing” people in vulnerable communities is termed as white saviourism (Mattsson 2023).

Ethnic tourism is described as being exclusively executed in non-western destinations located in the Global South (Mattsson 2023). White tourists seek

culturally different travel destinations that, in their imagination, offer lifestyles perceived as “primitive” in comparison to their modern lives at home (ibid.). She continues by arguing that such primitive lifestyles create an environment perceived by the white tourist as ideal in the quest for spiritual salvation and reconnecting with their authentic self. Mattsson suggests that the search for such culturally different environments reproduces the colonial behaviour of beautifying primitive cultures and commending their honourable ways of life. In so doing, such cultures are perceived as sanctuaries for white travellers from developed Western countries to expand beyond the boundaries of whiteness (Mattsson 2023).

#### 4.4 Commodification of culture

Commodification of culture is a concept used to describe the process by which culture becomes a commodity used to gain economic profit (Greenwood 1977). Commodification originally comes from the word “commodity” meaning something being sold for money, and “modification” which refers to a change (Dewayanti, A. & Raafigani, R. 2016). Greenwood (1977) discusses the nature of cultural commodification and brings attention to its destructive nature. He argues that the commodification of culture can lead to the erosion of authentic, original culture and the meaning of the culture for local people (ibid).

## 5. Results and Discussion

The car journey from Kathmandu to Sanitar took around 7 hours. The journey took us through valleys, thick jungle and winding, bumpy mountain roads. At times, we wondered if we would ever arrive....

We eventually arrived in Sanitar late afternoon, at the hottest time of day when most village residents were out working in the fields. The wheat fields surrounding the village swayed calmly in the warm breeze. The breathtaking beauty of the valley surrounding the village left us in awe. From the village, we could see rolling hills covered in lush green jungle with chirping birds and rhododendrons in full bloom. In comparison to the bustling capital city of Kathmandu with its concrete, dirt and hectic traffic, Sanitar was something completely different, a tranquil oasis nestled in the jungle. We were greeted by the owners of the Homestay, who immediately took us on a walk through the village. Throughout our walk we received many curious looks from the local residents. “Namaste”, a common greeting used to show respect, was the first word we learnt in the language, and a word we would come to use countless times during our stay. The warmth and welcoming Namastes of the residents we passed on our walk filled our hearts with joy, establishing the feeling we would continue to feel in the forthcoming weeks spent in Sanitar.

With this description of our first impression of Sanitar in mind, we will now present our findings from our field study. In the following section of the thesis we discuss the research questions by analysing the material we have gathered through interviews. Throughout our interviews we identified recurring topics and answers that we have chosen to further explore and analyse. We look deeper into the overall positive attitude towards tourism in Sanitar and explore its link to economic status. We then discuss the locals’ perceptions of tourists, referred to as the “Other” and their power to develop. Lastly, we discuss local residents' views on the future of Sanitar.



## 5.1 Perceptions of Tourism and their Link to Economic Status

While we were in Sanitar, Nepal for the purpose of gathering material for this thesis, we were repeatedly welcomed with blessings, positivity, and kindness. Every individual we met greeted us with open arms and showed great appreciation for our visit to their country. All respondents regardless of age and gender, viewed tourists and the tourism industry's contribution to Nepal as undoubtedly positive and wished for increased tourism. The majority of the residents in the community had, at the time of our study, not worked with tourism in the local area. Despite this, at least one member of almost every household in the village had experience with working in the tourism trekking industry in Nepal's mountainous regions. When speaking to these family members, no challenge or negative impact arising from tourism was ever mentioned, no matter how many times we asked. On the contrary, the conversations flourished when discussing the opportunities of tourism and how these opportunities can benefit Nepal and its inhabitants. "Ramro", the Nepalese word for "very good" was commonly used when describing tourism and tourists in Sanitar.

The positive attitude towards tourism in Nepal contradicts the documented negative impacts of tourism on the country's natural resources and our own perceptions of tourism. This is why we wanted to dig deeper into the question of why local residents' want tourists to come to Sanitar and what factors motivate the locals' engagement with tourists. It became apparent that one major reason for desiring tourism was that it could generate income for the village and individual households.

Ramro! It is good because it gives the state a lot of money. The state will in turn give a bit of that money back to the people of Nepal in the form of eg. new roads. A lot of people get jobs thanks to the tourism industry such as the homestay in Sanitar. <sup>1</sup>

Welcoming and hosting tourists was seen as an income opportunity that could improve people's quality of life. This confirms the findings of the IMF, demonstrating tourism as a key driver in economic development (UNWTO 2023). Thus, we argue that there is a possible relationship between the economic status of people and the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards tourism. This analysis is further supported by the fact that many respondents live in "survival mode". Nepal suffers from poverty: 20,3% of the population live below the national poverty line (Asian Development Bank n.d.). One person explicitly stated that "We are in

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with respondent aged 30+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

survival mode - we don't have the money.”<sup>2</sup> and “Tourists have a lot of money. We have nothing [economically speaking]. Tourists are rich and give us money.”<sup>3</sup>.

The expressed positive attitude towards tourism in Sanitar, may be closely tied to economic factors, as suggested by the correlation between poverty and positive attitude towards tourism. The prevalence of individuals working as porters, despite the demanding nature of the job (Fodors Travel 2024) underscores the economic factors that drive many to engage in tourism-related activities. Porters are hired during treks to carry tourist’s luggage and other things such as equipment, food, and beverages (Nepal Trekking Planner 2024). A large number of people from the village are engaged in trekking activities as porters, a role renowned for its demanding nature and typically unfavourable working conditions. When we asked one person with experience of working as a porter if they thought that people work with tourism out of joy, or because it is a way out of poverty, they answered: “Not because it is fun, but because people are poor. Why would someone want to carry so heavy [as a porter] if they were rich?”<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that the desire to work with tourism often stems from economic incitements. This can, however, vary depending on the nature of involvement in tourism.

It became apparent that while being a porter may be viewed as a means of economic survival, other forms of tourism, such as guiding or homestay tourism, seemed to be more attractive due to its less demanding physical nature. One respondent stated that if they were to work in the tourism industry they would not work as a porter but rather as a guide or translator<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the nuanced differences beneath the overall positivity, which mirrors the diversity and complexity of the tourism industry, and acknowledge that motivations for involvement with tourism can vary significantly depending on the specific role or experience offered.

As previously mentioned, when respondents were questioned about potential negative consequences of tourism, such as mass tourism and littering, many respondents consistently denied any adverse effects. We argue that one explanation for this could be that mass tourism has not yet been seen in Sanitar, making it irrelevant for them. Another explanation for this, more closely related to the issue of economic motives, might be that living in survival mode affects decision-making and long-term thinking (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with respondent aged 30+. (2024), Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with respondent aged 70+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with respondent aged 30+. (2024), Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In Sanitar, respondents frequently described themselves as living on the bare minimum due to inadequate living conditions and poor income<sup>6</sup>. Studies conducted show that when people are living under such conditions, they tend to prioritise short-term gains over long-term sustainability (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea 2017). Such a short-term focus tends to prioritise immediate benefits of tourism such as income, which potentially overshadows the long-term negative impacts that tourism may inflict on the area (ibid.). We believe that this could be another explanation as to why our respondents only brought up positive aspects of tourism. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution due to the fact that we have no concrete data on the economic status of the respondents, neither from the individuals themselves nor from government sources, because this data does not exist in this area. This means that we have had to rely on people's verbal description of their life situation, such as their characterisation of living in survival mode.

### 5.1.1 Generational nuances in perceptions of tourism

During the field study it became evident that there are generational differences in local perceptions of tourism. Although there appeared to be some shared imaginaries among the interviewed residents, the young adults between the ages of 20-30, tended to share a more pessimistic outlook on local tourism. This became evident when discussing tourism and the contribution that tourists are expected to make. The young adults we interviewed did not appear to share the same ideas about tourists bringing money and development to the village. Instead, tourism represented an opportunity for cultural exchange, and an opportunity to practise English as well as a means of broadening their horizons and exploring possibilities beyond their local community. Interactions with tourists were desired by young adults because they expressed a wish to gain new knowledge they said the tourists would possess. One person told us that “We can learn from them [the tourists], we can get new knowledge. Improve our English”<sup>7</sup>. We were told that young adults in Sanitar go abroad to work or to get an education as soon as they have saved enough money to be able to do so.

This perspective represented by the youth in the village aligns with the idea of glocalisation, which emphasises the interconnectedness of global and local cultural exchanges, and highlights the relationship between the two (Soulard & Salazar 2022). Tourism can serve as a platform for meaningful cross-cultural interactions, enabling residents to expand their global awareness and connections beyond their

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with respondent aged 30+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with respondent aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

immediate geographic boundaries (Soulard & Salazar 2022), while also serving as a platform for practice of language and cultural exchange in preparation for going abroad. Thus, the positive attitude towards tourism is not only linked to economic factors, though still closely associated.

## 5.2 The Power of the “Other” to Develop

Another emerging trend that became apparent throughout the study was how people referred to a community dependency on the “Other”, represented by tourists and the external resources they may bring to facilitate local development. We argue that such an experienced dependency could pose significant challenges to the sustainability and autonomy of local economies and cultures, as they become increasingly reliant on external factors beyond their control. Addressing these issues is imperative to foster resilient and self-sustaining tourism models that prioritise long-term community well-being and environmental preservation.

During our stay in Sanitar, we were informed that the first tourists had come to the village over 45 years ago <sup>8</sup>. Since then, the majority of them have made donations, sponsored education for children, and have initiated a project resulting in every household receiving access to water through water pipes <sup>9</sup>. During an interview, one respondent told us about their first encounter with tourists, visiting Sanitar for volunteer purposes;

[...] When the first tourists arrived here we were all terrified. Because we were so scared we chased them away. We arranged a ceremony with a priest to chase away all the bad spirits [\*the tourists]. After this, a translator came to the village and told us about the tourists. They said that the tourists were here to make some development projects. They wanted to develop agriculture here. But since we in this village chased them off, they did the development project in Giri [another village] instead. So we missed our opportunity. We in Sanitar did not have enough education to understand that the tourists wanted to do good here. [\*We proceeded to ask if tourists equal development] <sup>10</sup>.

Since then tourists have done projects such as opening schools, volunteering in schools and sponsoring education for children. We asked how development is created in the village and the person explained that:

[...] development happens because of tourists and foreigners. The healthpost, the school, it is all because of foreigners. There was another school also opened because of tourists but it is not open now <sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with respondent aged 70+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>9</sup> Group interview with 4 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepa

<sup>10</sup> Interview with respondent aged 70+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with respondent aged 70+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

These occurrences explained above can be analysed and understood using the concept of voluntourism. Voluntourism, as earlier described by Mattsson (2023), is a concept used to describe the process of volunteering tourists reproducing colonial beliefs of the “Third World” as poor and in need of help from external countries. Furthermore the concept delves into the phenomenon of Westerners reproducing colonial beliefs of themselves as more skilled in facilitating development. One important note is that the framework aims to avoid the oversimplification of associating whiteness solely with the undefined category of white Westerners, or that tourism only includes white people from Western countries (ibid). Hence, it is important to note that not all volunteers in Sanitar are necessarily white westerners. Many volunteers working at the local schools have been Chinese or Malaysian. The volunteers and tourists that come to the area surrounding Sanitar and who get involved in different development projects can be recognised as indirectly reproducing the colonial discourse of “rescuing” people through development projects. The act of indirectly reproducing such discourses isn’t necessarily conscious, but nevertheless risks negatively impacting the local community (Mattsson 2023). Voluntourism could therefore be argued to deepen a lack of confidence within the local community in facilitating development and change (ibid), as well as encouraging and exacerbating the feelings of inferiority expressed by some of the respondents. This could explain the elderly respondents' beliefs that no development will happen in Sanitar if no tourists come.

Additionally, Mattsson (2023) argues that the reproduction of such colonial behaviour can also take place within the sphere of ethnic tourism, when tourists actively seek culturally different environments, and glorify primitive cultures. One respondent stated that “[...] they [tourists] glorify everything here in the village: when elders carry things, how we eat and such.”<sup>12</sup> Given what Mattsson (2023) writes, we argue that such glorifying behaviour further reinforces power dynamics and the local residents perceptions of tourists being superior to themselves. This could in turn reinforce the local beliefs of tourists being different and portrayed as the “other”.

The actions of tourists practicing ethnic tourism and voluntourism arguably reproduce the colonial behaviour and the notion of tourists as “saviours”. In the case of Sanitar, this became apparent when local residents expressed their perceptions of tourists. Respondents commonly associated whiteness and tourism with development, modernity and wealth. Development was defined by many as better roads and houses, economic growth and more job opportunities. Tourist donations were frequently mentioned throughout the interviews, with many

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with 2 respondents aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

expressing gratitude and hope towards receiving more in the future. One local respondent told us “I think there is a bigger chance of development in the area thanks to donations from tourists”,<sup>13</sup> whereas another said, “It would be nice if tourists could work with development in Sanitar. If foreigners come to the village, Sanitar will be developed, but if no foreigners come here then nothing will be better here.”<sup>14</sup>

We argue that this perception of tourists affects the self-image of individuals and communities, and influences their confidence in creating change in the future. However, additional research is needed to better understand how tourist donations and the perceptions of tourists as the agents of change may impact the community and the individuals who belong to it, and the community’s capability and confidence in initiating change. How does the history of tourist donations affect local capabilities to change something in the future? And, how does this affect the knowledge of how to contribute to the development of one’s community and society, if one always relies on external forces for development? Despite this not being the focus of this study, we believe that these questions are crucial to explore in order to gain a better understanding of the complexity surrounding the tourism sphere.

During our study, it became apparent that people in the village had a strong positive attitude towards whiteness. The history of tourists bringing resources and investment to the community may have fostered a positive perception of white people among local residents, leading to the idolisation of whiteness as a symbol of prosperity, modernity and progress. Numerous individuals in the village have expressed admiration for whiteness and a desire to be white. This does not appear to be unique to Sanitar, as the discourse of whiteness being associated with something good is seen in other countries and is deeply embedded in colonial history (Mattsson 2023). Nepal has never formally been colonised (Crews 2018); however, we argue that the attitudes shared by many respondents is linked to an indirect reproduction of colonial discourses. Furthermore, we argue that the aspirations and acts of worship towards whiteness may be linked to the prolonged presence of white tourists in Sanitar, spanning over 45 years, who have contributed financially to the village’s development efforts. These findings reflect the work of Mattsson (2023) concerning the respondents’ beliefs that white Westerners are more prosperous and more competent than local inhabitants in successfully creating development.

Considering that tourist actions have initiated development projects and sponsored education in Sanitar, it is not difficult to see how these imaginaries were created.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with respondent aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>14</sup> Group Interview with 3 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

These actions could arguably serve to continuously reaffirm local perceptions of tourists. When asked to describe an average tourist, one respondent said:

Tourists have a lot of money. We have nothing [economically speaking]. Tourists are rich and give us money. We have a lower status than them. Here, white people are thought to be millionaires, it is good for the development of the village <sup>15</sup>.

Tourists were commonly depicted as being superior to residents and more capable of facilitating development, based on the perception of tourists being more educated and wealthy. Many of those interviewed stated that they were not able to create change themselves due to insufficient income. On the subject of superiority one respondent expressed that “[tourists] are better than us and have sent us money when we are sick, for marriage ceremonies and other ceremonies.”<sup>16</sup> whereas another said, “They have better education, more money and live better lives. They are smarter.”<sup>17</sup>. Tourists could therefore be perceived as being a key to a better, richer, and more developed life for the local community and its inhabitants

Noel B Salazar (2011) argues that there is a strong link between imaginaries and tourism, claiming that imaginaries within the tourism sphere tend to focus on the power of the “Other”, triggered by economic differences. This could be said about some of the interviewed residents in Sanitar, whose imaginaries of the “Other”, i.e tourists being white, wealthy and smarter, arguably impact their desire for increased tourism and obstruct their perception of any risks. Our findings suggest that there is a prevailing whiteness norm among the community, which influences beauty standards and self image. Throughout our stay in Sanitar we were frequently complimented on our white skin, with one respondent telling us, “When I see white people I also want to become lighter. Also you have nice clothes so I also want to wear western clothes.”<sup>18</sup>. The notion of wanting to become white appeared to have a strong link to economic wealth and better living conditions. Being anything other than white was commonly associated with having dirty, low-paid jobs that commonly involved high sun exposure, such as farming. One elderly respondent told us “We are dirty and ugly from working in the fields.”<sup>19</sup>, whereas another compared herself to tourists by saying “[...] we are so dark and dirty.”<sup>20</sup>. When asked whether or not tourists are associated with beauty, another respondent said

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<sup>15</sup> Group Interview with 3 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>16</sup> Group Interview with 3 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with respondent aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with respondent, aged 30+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>19</sup> Group Interview with 4 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>20</sup> Group Interview with 3 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

“Yes, of course! We have the same blood but Westerners can afford to look pretty.”<sup>21</sup>. We suggest that beliefs such as these confirm the presence of a whiteness norm within the tourism realm.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that there is a desire not only to look, but also to live like the “Other”. We interpret this as a consequence of tourists publicly displaying their wealth when undertaking costly development projects in and around Sanitar, such as the construction of a playground or a health post. The prolonged presence of tourists presents an image of an alternative, perhaps more modern lifestyle in comparison to the life in the village. Consequently, there is a longing to mirror the lives of these tourists - to be educated, traveled, affluent, and to have light skin, as well as a desire to adopt a modern way of life, which the local residents interpret as a better standard of living. When we asked a woman whether she felt embarrassed about her lifestyle, she responded that she did and when we asked whether she wanted a better life because of that, she answered: “Yes, after seeing beautiful white tourists with nice clothes.”<sup>22</sup>.

### 5.3 The Future of Tourism in Sanitar

For this study, we set out with the aim of understanding local residents’ perceptions towards shaping the future of tourism in Sanitar. After interviewing 21 people, we concluded that there is no clear answer to this question. The majority of those we interviewed found the question too difficult to answer, saying that they couldn’t make any long-term predictions. When speaking to local residents of the ages 50+, they justified their answers by saying that they didn’t know how long into the foreseeable future they would live. Imagining Sanitar in the future, let alone the future of the local tourism industry, was hard enough. Arguably, such answers could be influenced by the fact of living in survival mode, when even the near future is sometimes uncertain.

Although none of the interviewed local residents were able to directly answer the question regarding Sanitar’s future and the local tourism industry, all of our respondents expressed a strong desire to welcome more tourists to Sanitar and strengthen the local Tamang culture. In relation to this, many respondents wanted to incorporate Tamang culture into local tourism practices. By doing so, many hoped that more people would learn about their culture and spread this knowledge

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<sup>21</sup> Group Interview with 4 respondents, mixed ages. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with respondent aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal.



all over the world. One person expressed the importance of increasing tourism in Sanitar out of fear that their culture would disappear by saying “If more tourists learn about the culture, maybe it won't disappear.”<sup>23</sup> .

Our interpretation of this yearning to generate a global awareness about Tamang culture, strongly coincides with wanting more tourism in Sanitar. However, not just any tourism but specifically homestay tourism. Many respondents said that they would love to have more homestays in Sanitar in the future, rather than conventional hotels. This is interesting as it confirms Kafle's (2023) claim that homestay tourism is more favourable in creating opportunities for local residents to share their culture, in comparison to opportunities given in conventional hotels. Additionally, homestay tourism encourages tourists to consume local products (ibid.), for example through cultural programmes.

Our findings regarding the desire of the interviewed residents for tourists to engage in local culture can be analysed using glocalization. Many respondents expressed a desire to organise a cultural programme for tourists coming to stay in the recently opened homestay. Such a cultural programme had never been organised before, but had been discussed among members of the village prior to our arrival. Organising cultural programmes, creates an environment that fosters global exchanges of local culture, and provides an opportunity to both promote and preserve the local culture. One respondents expressed that “I would like to have tourists in Sanitar. They can learn Tamang culture.”<sup>24</sup>. The concept of glocalisation highlights the two-way exchange that occurs when tourists learn about local cultures, encouraging cultural awareness and mutual understanding (Soulard & Salazar 2022). Furthermore, another respondent stated “A cultural programme could give more people in the village income.”<sup>25</sup>. Highlighting another reason for sharing Tamang culture.

By delving into the reasons behind the desire to revive Tamang culture we can analyse how locals envision the future development of tourism in Sanitar and what possible consequences these desires could have. We have questioned whether this desire is driven by the idea of financial gain - leading to more financial stability in the future - or whether our respondents genuinely believe that spreading Tamang culture via tourists will have a positive outcome for the revival of their traditional culture. We have questioned whether a profit-driven motive may compromise the long-term preservation of culture, potentially leading to the commodification of cultural heritage. When culture is seen as a tourist attraction in and of itself, it might lead to an erosion of its original significance (Dewayanti & Raafigani 2016).

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with respondent, aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal

<sup>24</sup> Interview with respondent, aged 20+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal

<sup>25</sup> Interview with respondent, aged 30+. (2024). Sanitar, Nepal

After our departure from Sanitar we were informed that the first cultural programme was organised for a new group of tourists staying in the homestay. The programme was initiated and conducted by local residents, resulting in a party involving many members of the community. The programme was entirely initiated by residents in Sanitar, independently from the tour guides and owners of the homestay. We have been told that the event was a great success and will hopefully take place again in the future. Whether or not the recurrence of such an event in Sanitar could lead to the commodification of cultural heritage or the strengthening of the community and the revival of the Tamang culture remains uncertain. The discussed implications of cultural revival through tourism activities are limited, due to the fact that there have been no cultural programmes organised in Sanitar prior to this study. It also needs to be made clear that this was not the primary focus of our research and our knowledge on the subject is therefore limited.

Lastly, the concept of sustainability in relation to future tourism development in Sanitar was hard for respondents to grasp. This could be influenced by living in survival mode, leading to the prioritisation of short-term goals rather than long-term sustainability (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea 2017). We argue that the inability to reflect on the difference between sustainable and non-sustainable tourism development in Sanitar could pose a threat to the long-term development of tourism in the village. If residents can not envision the potential negative impacts of increased tourism in Sanitar, the risk is that they may not recognise any negative issues in time to reverse them. Such negative issues could be related to littering, overcrowding, cultural commodification and deforestation.

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis we have investigated the voices of local residents in Sanitar with regard to the tourism industry in Nepal. The aim of the thesis has been to gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of the tourism sphere in Nepal.

Our findings show that, at the time of our study, there was an unconditionally positive attitude of tourists and the tourism industry in Sanitar. Every respondent expressed a desire to increase the number of visitors and develop the local tourism industry. None of our respondents could think of any negative aspects of tourists and the tourism industry. We argue that the factors driving local people to engage in the tourism industry, and their positive attitude towards tourists are linked to their economic situation and their desire to mirror the lives of the tourists. Many respondents were in “survival mode” and could see an opportunity to increase their income through tourism engagement. We argue that living in survival mode could lead to short-term thinking where the positive aspects of tourism outweigh the possible challenges. However, this did not apply to all respondents interviewed. Young adults in the village expressed other reasons for engaging in tourism, such as the exchange of culture and the opportunity to practise their English language. We argue that this is as a tangible example of the concept of glocalisation, where tourism in Sanitar represents how the world is interconnected, creating opportunities to expand one's network and be a destination where the local can meet the global.

Moreover, our findings underscore the complexity of local attitudes and perceptions of tourists, and the interplay of tourism, whiteness and development which may have influenced these perceptions. Tourists were repeatedly described as facilitators of development and change. We argue that these perceptions have created local desires to mirror the imagined standards and lifestyles of tourists, supporting power dynamics rooted in colonial beliefs.

With regard to our research question, covering local perceptions of the future of Sanitar's tourism industry, we have no clear answer. Many respondents stated that it was hard to imagine the future, as they didn't know if they would be alive in the near future. Despite that, many expressed a desire to revive their Tamang culture in

the hope that it would continue to be practised for generations to come. Furthermore, many expressed an interest in wanting tourists to learn about their cultural heritage and spread the word about the Tamang people through cultural programmes. This raises a concern regarding the balance between economic gain for sharing their traditional culture with tourists, the associated risk of cultural commodification, and the authentic preservation of the Tamang culture.

In a world of increasing tourism, and the ensuing discussions and debates on how to develop or change the tourism industry, we believe it is important to highlight the voices of the host country and residents, particularly in peripheral areas such as rural settings. This stems from our findings suggesting that tourism impacts so much more than the natural environment. The effects on a community's confidence in facilitating change and the influence on an individual's self-image, confirms the dynamics and complexity of the tourism sphere. By continuing to highlight local residents' attitudes towards hosting tourists in rural communities, one broadens the perspectives on global tourism and creates a more universal and inclusive agenda.

An interesting finding that we believe needs further investigation is the difficulty for locals to imagine and predict future tourism development. With regards to this, we believe it would be valuable to investigate how living in a country prone to natural disasters and political instability affects an individual's future outlook. This would lead to a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for their inability to envision the future. We believe this is important for raising awareness of the possible effects of short-term thinking on sustainable tourism, commercialisation of culture, and cultural preservation.

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