
More than ‘Ice’: Assessing Tourist Perceptions and Cultural Impacts of Arctic Expedition Cruises

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Abstract

This paper explores how Arctic expedition cruises shape tourist perceptions of Arctic culture and also the broader cultural impacts on local communities. Through in-depth interviews with passengers and industry experts, the paper analyses the effectiveness of onboard cultural communication strategies, revealing tensions between commodification and authentic exchange. Findings demonstrate that despite minimal initial interest in local Arctic culture, passengers developed significant respect for local traditions post-voyage revealing a transformation facilitated by staff-led education and community visits. However, this exchange often remained one-sided, with tourists underestimating their influence on Arctic communities. The study identifies the adherence to industry, community and visitor guidelines as a potential standard for ethical Arctic tourism, though regulatory gaps persist for larger cruise operators. As climate change increases Arctic accessibility, these insights offer timely recommendations for balancing tourism growth with cultural preservation.

Key Words *Arctic cruise tourism, Commodification, Community Disruption, Passenger perception; socio-cultural impact*

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Introduction

This paper explores how Arctic expedition cruises shape tourist perceptions of Arctic culture and also the broader cultural impacts on local communities. The study takes place against the background of a rapidly growing cruise industry and increasing environmental and cultural denigration of destinations (Hoarau-Heemstra, 2023). The 2024 State of the Cruise Industry Report shows 2023 as a return to the pre-Corona growth trajectory with 31.7 million ocean cruise passengers surpassing 2019 levels by 7%, (CLIA, 2024). The Arctic, the focus of this study, has similarly seen a dramatic increase in maritime traffic of over 7 percent a year with ‘Last chance tourism’ playing a significant role (Mannherz et al, 2024; Wizenberg, 2024). The number of cruise passengers in Greenland increased by 73.8 percent from 2022 to 2023 for a total of 76477 in 2023 (Visit Greenland, 2024). As explained in the Greenland 2023 Tourism Statistics Report, “throughout the summer of 2023, there were several smaller towns that experienced 2 or 3 cruise ships docking on the same day, where hundreds - or in some cases thousands - of passengers had the opportunity to disembark and move around the town” (Visit Greenland, 2024, p. 9) which can be overwhelming. Cruise ships are the single largest provider of mass tourism in the Arctic with their popularity rapidly increasing. Local reports show the

population's awareness of the problems caused by shipping, but also the importance of the revenue brought by the cruise industry (Chrobog, 2024). Juneau, Alaska has been described by local inhabitants as "We've become an amusement park" (Chrobog, 2024) showing the irony that what the tourists seek (i.e. glaciers, wildlife, serene and quiet space), is simultaneously what they are destroying. On the other hand, a local representative commented that theatre performances provide an opportunity to dispel stereotypes of the Inuit and their way of life (Wizenberg, 2024).

Against this controversial background, this paper aims to evaluate the impact of Arctic expedition cruises, a subset of tourism cruises, on tourists' awareness and appreciation of local culture and also the methods through which cruise companies endeavour to communicate this to them. Ultimately the study aims to provide a set of recommendations for cruise operators to enhance cultural sensitivity and cultural sustainability in expedition cruises.

Literature Review

Commodification & Community Disruption

Commodification is defined as "a process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value, in a context of trade, thereby becoming goods (and services)" (Cohen, 1988, p. 380). In the tourism context, commodification refers to the process of transforming unique, authentic, or emotionally charged experiences into standardized, marketable products that can be mass-produced and sold for profit (Cohen, 1988). In the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), commodification plays a complex and often contradictory role—both enabling and undermining the value of experiences (e.g. ensuring safety, reliability, and consistent quality vs. transforming of local cultures, traditions, or natural sites into sanitized, market-friendly versions). Similarly, commodification can either "contribute to cultural sustainability or hinder it" (Bai & Weng, 2023, p. 1). Studies have shown that "cultural commodification driven by tourism development can preserve traditional culture, promote cultural revival, enhance ethnic identity, and increase ethnic pride" (Bai & Weng, 2023, p. 1) as well as provide the community members with an opportunity to increase their income, in turn improving the welfare of their society (e.g. Xie et al, 2011, p. 61). There is always the risk that through the efforts to cater to tourists, the local culture is commodified (Moreno, 2024) which may conflict with the perceived authenticity in that the desire of locals to fit to the tastes and demands of tourists may influence them to adjust the nature of their performances and behavior (Xie, 2011, p. 60; Tuyen, 2023). On the one hand, goods are considered authentic when they "are made by the members of a society, using materials produced by that society, made for the people of that society and used by them" and on the other "authenticity lies in making work which tries to recreate the past" (Hitchcock & Teague, 2000, p. 172).

Whether commodification erodes or redefines authenticity is still contested (Tuyen, 2023). However, scholars broadly agree that tourism disrupts communities, often leading to cultural erosion. As Moreno (2024) notes, "local values and concerns may take a backseat" when organizations prioritize accommodating and satisfying tourists. Such disruption becomes tangible when, for instance, daily routines are altered to accommodate performances for visitors. This can leave locals feeling 'a loss of security and connection' (Moreno, 2024), a sentiment intrinsically tied to commodification.

Paradoxically, while commodification may distort cultural authenticity through tourism, tourism, in turn, facilitates cultural exchange - a process that, in theory, could mitigate such harms.

Cultural Exchange and Acculturation

Yet even as commodification threatens authenticity, proponents frame tourism as a vehicle for cultural exchange (UNESCO, 2022) which is a concept central to cultural diplomacy. Cummings (2003 in El-Asri & El Karfa, 2024) defines cultural diplomacy as "the

exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding” (p. 63). However, in practice, power imbalances often distort this ideal. As Mahoney and Collins (2019) argue, the cruise ship industry exemplifies these inequalities, where capital accumulation “leads to massive social harms, inequalities, and economic exploitation” (p. 4). Hierarchical structures value some groups over others (e.g. between employees and passengers, or cruise liners and Indigenous businesses) reinforcing systemic disparities even amid cultural exchange (Mahoney & Collins, 2019). This situation often accelerates acculturation where exposure to tourists’ demands reshapes local traditions, values and social hierarchies (Özekici & Ünlüönen, 2020).

Cartwright & Baird (1999) describe acculturation as a relatively “one-sided process in respect to the cruise industry due to the short time an individual cruiser spends in a single place” (p. 159). While passengers re-embark after mere hours, communities face repeated exposure to tourist cultures over months or years which creates a dynamic that disproportionately impacts local cultures without reciprocal influence on visitors (Elhami & Roshan, 2024, p. 182). The effects of this imbalance can range from superficial shifts in individual habits to transformative changes in core cultural characteristics (Szabó & Ward, 2022). A key element of acculturation is cultural learning, which comes about through both observation and interaction (Elhami & Roshan, 2024, p. 185). For instance, Arctic communities, as noted by Chen et al. (2020, p. 9), have adopted new languages to facilitate communication with tourists—a pragmatic response underscoring acculturation’s tangible societal repercussions. While acculturation represents a significant cultural consequence of cruise tourism, it is only one of many far-reaching impacts.

Having established the complex interplay between commodification, cultural exchange, and acculturation in cruise tourism, this paper now turns to its methodological framework to evaluate how Arctic expedition cruises navigate these tensions in practice.

Methodology

Guided by a constructivist paradigm, this study employs qualitative methods to explore how cultural meanings are co-created and communicated in Arctic expedition cruising, aligning with theories of commodification (Cohen, 1988) and acculturation (Szabó & Ward, 2022). By prioritizing participant perspectives and lived experiences, the methodology captures the passengers’ cultural understanding and perceptions of Greenlandic communities.

The data was gathered through eleven semi-structured interviews consisting of nine passengers who completed an Arctic expedition cruise in Greenland and two Greenlandic tourism experts, whose insights validated and contextualized passenger perceptions.

The interview design included question on (1) Passengers’ cultural understanding and perceptions of Greenlandic communities, (2) Cruise operators’ efforts to support local economies and cultural preservation, (3) Methods used by companies to convey respect and balance in Arctic tourism and (4) Perceived impacts of cruising on host communities.

Recordings were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Participants provided informed consent, and findings are context-specific to Arctic cruising whereby generalizability requires broader sampling.

Findings & Discussion

Participant Overview

The study included nine expedition cruise passengers (four male, five female; aged 46–75) and two Greenlandic tourism experts. While all passengers were Arctic first-timers, they were seasoned cruisers, reflecting a demographic seeking novel experiences within a familiar travel format. Expert #1 is the Head of Content and Development at Visit Greenland, Greenland’s national tourism board and Expert #2 owner of Sustine Consult, a consultancy firm advising tourism companies with different projects regarding sustainable tourism in Greenland

also working with the national tourism board. The expedition cruise had a total of 200 passengers visiting villages with, at times, fewer inhabitants than passengers.

Motivation

“Ice” was one of the main reasons for taking this expedition. The other two most common were to see Arctic animals and get to know Greenland, the Canadian Arctic and the Arctic in general. The Inuit and their culture were a minor motivation, only listed by three of the interviewees. Notably, one participant admitted to not having given “much thought to the culture, the Inuit, or the Arctic communities” pre-voyage, underscoring how expedition cruises can serve as inadvertent cultural ambassadors. Other reasons mentioned by the passengers were the atmosphere, the fact it was a research trip, and the luxury of the cruise.

Perceptions of the Culture

The interviewees were asked how they would evaluate the cruise line’s efforts to foster cultural understanding and respect towards the local communities before they docked. All passengers positively evaluated the cruise line’s pre-docking cultural education efforts, primarily through briefings and lectures. The presence of an Inuit cultural ambassador further enhanced exchange opportunities. To assess any change in knowledge and understanding, the passengers were asked to describe their understanding of the local Arctic culture both before and after participating in the expedition cruise, as well as how and why their perception changed. Pre-cruise, some passengers had prepared through research, but all reported significant post-expedition shifts in understanding and appreciation of Arctic communities’ cultural resilience and development in challenging environments.

Cultural Commodification & Community Disruption

The study revealed divergent views on cultural commodification. The passengers, on the one hand, largely perceived commercial interactions as symbiotic, praising opportunities for artisans to sell handmade goods and generate income even if high priced. Moreover, a number of the interviewees stated that they felt that the locals enjoyed selling their products. On the other hand, the experts critiqued performative elements, with one noting events felt staged rather than authentic (Expert #2). This tension aligns with Cohen’s (1988) commodification paradox: while economic benefits are tangible, the risk of cultural dilution persists. Expert #1 proposed a balanced approach, noting commercialization could fund cultural preservation which is a view shared by passengers who saw tourism as incentivizing cultural adaptation.

As tourists are only rarely seen in many of the Arctic settlements, it was interesting to find out whether community disruption was visibly present when a cruise with 200 passengers docked in a village with fewer inhabitants. Most passengers believed locals welcomed their presence as a cultural showcase. Interviewee #5 did see the cruise as a disruption, but in a positive sense, as “they were able to present their lives” and that they “think it actually makes everyone proud when they can talk about their own culture”. However, subtle ambivalence emerged; some sensed passive tolerance rather than wholehearted welcome (Interviewee #1, Interviewee #5). Positive disruptions included medical assistance from cruise staff (Interviewee #5), demonstrating potential reciprocity.

Cultural Exchange, Acculturation & Impacts

The study revealed a complex dynamic of cultural exchange facilitated by the cruise’s programming. An onboard ethnologist served as a “co-presenter for the Inuit” (Interviewee #5), working alongside local communities to share cultural knowledge. This was supported by an Inuit cultural ambassador who enhanced passenger engagement. Passengers had mixed opinions on whether tourism triggers dilution, change, or influence on Arctic culture. The research uncovered divergent perspectives on acculturation. Interviewee #7 clearly felt that acculturation had taken place, and that it “changes the way of life of these native peoples” while others argued that any transformation resulted more from cruise frequency than tourist

interactions (Interviewee #8). Most participants agreed that cultural evolution was inevitable, with one remarking "we no longer live like our ancestors" (Interviewee #6), acknowledging that climate change and technology influenced Inuit culture as much as tourism. Interestingly, some passengers reported the opposite experience, believing they were the ones being culturally influenced, having learned through the experience (Interviewee #8).

Economically, the cruise industry brought multiple benefits to host communities through docking fees, local procurement of crafts and food, and charitable donations. An innovative development involved hybrid ships that extended the tourism season while delivering essential supplies to otherwise isolated communities (Interviewee #2). Despite these advantages, regulatory gaps emerged as a significant concern, with current lack of port regulations creating risks of overcrowding (Expert #1) which is a situation the Greenland government is addressing through policy development.

Notably, while few passengers cited Inuit culture as their primary motivation for the expedition, all reported leaving with profound impressions of Inuit traditions and resilience. Many were particularly struck by the preservation of traditional practices like kayak hunting (Interviewee #5) and the contrast between romanticized notions and the reality of contemporary Inuit life (Expert #2).

Suggestions for Improvements

When asked for suggestions, most passengers praised the cruise experience, though some desired more immersive cultural exposure—such as observing traditional Inuit activities like seal hunting or craft-making—which time constraints prevented. A minority noted the cruise avoided deeper engagement with critical issues like climate change to preserve its ‘pleasant’ atmosphere. This research highlights the need to better integrate climate change education with cultural programming to provide passengers with a more comprehensive understanding of Arctic vulnerability.

Both experts emphasized the unique role of cruise ships in Arctic tourism and the importance of partnerships like those with the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO) which collaborates with Greenlandic destination marketing organizations (DMO) in different regions or directly with local communities. The expedition cruise studied adhered to AECO’s community guidelines, which, as Expert #1 explained, are developed collaboratively with Greenlandic communities to standardize respectful tourist behavior (e.g., cultural protocols, environmental safeguards). Guidelines for guests and visitors, site-specific guidelines, operational and marketing guidelines and so on are available (AECO, n.d.). It is then the responsibility of the cruise ships to implement the guidelines, meaning to inform and teach the passengers to respect and follow these guidelines when they are ashore. The interviewed passengers gave the impression that these guidelines were conveyed successfully through the lectures before going on land, and that they were perceived as helpful information. Expert #2 confirms that the community guidelines “are really great for mitigating conflict between tourists and locals”, as the tourists are given a basis of what to expect and how to behave. The cooperation with AECO is very beneficial for local communities, however, as their name states, they only work with expedition cruise operators. This means that larger cruise lines are not yet provided with these community guidelines. As the ice continues to melt, the distribution of these guidelines may become increasingly important, as larger cruise ships are then able to visit the region, carrying a mass of passengers not comparable to an expedition cruise ship.

The experts recommend that the cruise lines ensure contact between them and the Arctic communities. The destinations could provide them with local knowledge, such as avoiding a specific region due to it currently being narwal breeding season or handling potentially dangerous situations due to ice conditions. A “better dialogue with the destinations and bringing in local knowledge” (Expert #2) would be a great way to improve cooperation.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study revealed a notable paradox: while the Inuit culture was initially a minor motivation for passengers (cited by only three interviewees), direct interactions with local communities ultimately left the deepest impression on most participants. These encounters fostered significant shifts in perspective, cultivating greater respect for and understanding of Inuit traditions, history, and ways of life.

The main insights provided by the passengers on the cultural impact of Arctic expedition cruises on local communities were that the cruise and its passengers carry a significant amount of responsibility, and that respect is a crucial element when it comes to connecting with different cultures.

When taking both the passengers' and the experts' viewpoints of cultural exchange into account, it can be said that cultural exchange did occur, though it was often perceived as one-sided. One can talk about a 'cultural exchange skewed asymmetrically' whereby the passengers were largely unaware of their potential impact on host communities, highlighting a need for greater reflexivity in tourism practices.

The staff, the expedition leader, and the specialists all played a significant role in how culture was conveyed to the passengers. They were a main factor for the perceived success of the cruise.

Three key recommendations emerged from this study:

1. Guideline adherence: All Arctic expedition cruises should join AECO and rigorously implement its sets of guidelines.
2. Collaborative partnerships: Cruise operators must deepen ties with local DMO and Indigenous communities to align tourism with cultural priorities.
3. Visitors' training: Pre-landing education is critical, integrating critical issues from climate change impact on arctic communities to cultural understanding.

Limitations and further research

The study's small sample size (nine passengers, two experts) and focus on a single expedition cruise line limits generalizability. Due to limited funding and time constraints, local community participants were not included in this study. Therefore, future research should expand participant pools (include diverse cruise lines, include local stakeholders, consider quantitative data), assess long-term cultural impacts on Inuit communities and evaluate the efficacy of AECO guidelines in practice.

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