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CURRENT STATE AND CHALLENGES OF USING NATIONAL FASHION ELEMENTS IN UZBEKISTAN'S TOURISM MARKET

Yusupova Mokhinur Farkhod qizi
Independent Researcher (PhD),
Tashkent State University of Economics
E-mail: mohiwka_93@mail.ru
ORCID: 0009-0005-8009-9614

Abstract. National fashion elements integrated into tourism products play an important role in introducing tourists to cultural heritage. Therefore, it is essential to study the role of regional design features of Uzbek national costume in the formation of a destination image. Previous studies have mainly focused on tourism development and the history of costume, while current patterns of using national fashion elements and the challenges of their practical implementation remain insufficiently explored. This study examines the perceptions of tourism management specialists, as well as representatives of fashion and handicraft enterprises, in order to evaluate the characteristics of integrating national fashion elements into tourism education.

The study suggests that a well-supported training framework is necessary to develop the cultural competence of tourism specialists and enable them to effectively integrate national fashion elements into tourism services and destination branding. The research was conducted using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), based on the conceptual background of national fashion and tourism literature. A combined quantitative approach was applied, using data collected from tourism experts and vocational trainers involved in the integration of national fashion elements into the cultural tourism market of Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The results showed no significant differences between the perceptions of stakeholders in both groups. In particular, no significant mean differences were found in respondents' perceptions based on their professional affiliation. However, the AHP priority scores for key implementation barriers indicated statistically significant differences in the evaluation of certain factors. The study also provides theoretical and practical recommendations for the tourism and fashion sectors. Considering Uzbekistan's cultural diversity as a tourism destination, the study outlines ways to provide effective institutional support for integrating national fashion elements into the national tourism market.

Keywords: national fashion, cultural tourism, heritage, Analytical Hierarchy Process, cultural branding.

Аннотация. Национальные элементы моды, интегрированные в туристские продукты, играют важную роль, поскольку выступают средством ознакомления туристов с культурным наследием. В связи с этим особую актуальность приобретает изучение роли региональных дизайнерских особенностей узбекского национального костюма в процессе формирования имиджа туристской дестинации. Вместе с тем предыдущие исследования были преимущественно сосредоточены на вопросах развития туризма и истории костюма, тогда как современные практики использования национальных модных элементов и проблемы их внедрения в данной сфере остаются недостаточно изученными. Настоящее исследование направлено на анализ восприятия специалистов туристической отрасли, работающих в сфере управления туризмом, а также представителей предприятий модной индустрии и ремесленного производства с целью оценки особенностей интеграции элементов национальной моды в туристское образование.

Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что для формирования у специалистов туристической отрасли высокого уровня культурной компетентности и обеспечения эффективной интеграции элементов национальной моды в туристские услуги и брендинг дестинаций необходима комплексная и институционально поддерживаемая система подготовки кадров. Исследование было проведено с использованием метода анализа иерархий (АHP) и моделирования структурными уравнениями (SEM), основанных на концептуальных положениях научной литературы, посвященной национальной моде и туризму. Методологическую основу исследования составил комплексный количественный подход, основанный на данных, полученных от экспертов туристической отрасли и преподавателей профессионального образования, занимающихся вопросами интеграции национальных модных элементов в рынок культурного туризма города Ташкента, Узбекистан.

Полученные результаты показали отсутствие статистически значимых различий между оценками заинтересованных сторон, представляющих обе группы респондентов. В частности, не было выявлено значимых различий в средних значениях восприятия участников исследования в зависимости от их профессиональной принадлежности. Однако анализ приоритетов с использованием метода АНР по ключевым барьерам внедрения показал наличие статистически значимых различий в оценке отдельных факторов. Исследование также предлагает ряд теоретических и практических рекомендаций, имеющих значение для развития туристической и модной отраслей. Кроме того, учитывая культурное многообразие Узбекистана как туристской дестинации, в работе представлены подходы к обеспечению эффективной институциональной поддержки интеграции элементов национальной моды в национальный туристский рынок страны.

Ключевые слова: национальная мода, культурный туризм, культурное наследие, метод анализа иерархий (АНР), культурный брендинг.

INTRODUCTION

Early studies on this topic revealed that there is no substantial distinction between the levels of cultural representation in traditional clothing and modern fashion products [1,5,7,9]. This finding is closely aligned with the study by Zhong et al. [15], entitled "Symbolic Interactionism: Exploring the Experience of Traditional Costume in a Destination," which examined the contribution of traditional costume experiences to tourist engagement in a destination setting through the lens of symbolic interaction and visitor experience.

Researchers have traditionally focused on the benefits of national fashion, including cultural identity preservation, destination differentiation, tourist engagement, and local economic development [2–4,6,8,11,12]. Among the various forms of cultural heritage used by tourism destinations, national fashion elements are of particular importance because they are visually recognizable and capable of conveying cultural meanings effectively [1,9,13–15].

Although academic interest in cultural tourism is increasing, there is still limited research evidence on national fashion commercialization and its integration into the tourism market using AHP and SEM methods, especially in the context of Uzbekistan. In order to avoid the risk of cultural authenticity errors in tourism products, many tourism enterprises rely on expert assessments from the perspective of cultural design [1,10,13].

The rapid development of cultural tourism markets provides tourism enterprises with wide opportunities to use national fashion elements, such as ikat fabrics, traditional embroidery, national costume designs, and regional ornaments, in the visitor experience. Therefore, it is important to examine how selected fashion features influence destination image. It is equally important to understand the role of national costume in reflecting regional identity, cultural authenticity, social values, and related cultural meanings [5,7,9,14].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Earlier studies on national costume, such as Atakhanova [1], mainly focused on sewing techniques, decorative features, and design characteristics of Uzbek national clothing, while paying limited attention to tourism-stakeholder input. Since the early 2020s, however, studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between visitor experiences arising from traditional-costume activities and the destination image shaped by cultural interpretation and tourist engagement [4,6,15]. Therefore, the integration of national fashion elements is increasingly recognized as a component of destination differentiation and an important factor in the development of cultural tourism [4,6,15].

The present study focuses on national fashion elements through the systematic evaluation of tourism-market-related barriers. The implementation-barrier variable was developed on the basis of previous research, particularly the work of Jeong et al. [6], who examined several types of culturalization strategies. In the current study, implementation barriers are classified into four categories: 1) barriers to authentic production; 2) constraints on market promotion; 3) limitations in professional training; and 4) obstacles to institutional support.

A closer analysis of existing research shows that historical, ethnographic, aesthetic, cultural, and design aspects of national clothing have received greater attention than the effectiveness of these elements in the tourism market [1,5,7,9,13,14]. Zhong et al. [15] examined only selected types of destination experiences, which indicates the need for broader empirical research in this area.

The key research questions addressed in this study are as follows: Does the use of national fashion elements influence destination image or tourists' intention to purchase local fashion products? Are there differences in perceptions of implementation barriers between tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives? Since there is limited evidence on the effective integration of national fashion into the Uzbek tourism context, the

current study focuses on the characteristics of implementation barriers that complicate the use of national fashion elements in tourism practice among key stakeholders.

The objective of the study is to identify potential differences in stakeholder perceptions, with particular attention to professional training, and to discuss the role of national fashion integration in tourism services. With a focus on the professional knowledge of tourism specialists, this study investigates the effectiveness of using an integrated AHP–SEM approach [6,15] for the systematic evaluation of national fashion integration from the stakeholder perspective [4,6]. In particular, the study examines the extent to which tourism specialists are supported through practical exposure to national fashion elements, including ikat fabrics, traditional embroidery, and regional ornaments, as well as through cultural interpretation and visitor-experience integration in tourism training programs in Tashkent. This context remains relatively under-researched in terms of the tourism-market use of national fashion elements.

Therefore, there is a strong need to obtain empirical findings that align with national tourism priorities and provide clearer direction for the development of authentic fashion products, cultural tourism services, and destination branding in Uzbekistan, especially in Tashkent. Supporting strategy developers in tourism organizations remains an important challenge in evidence-based tourism planning.

In this regard, the present study focuses on an integrated approach to reveal the effect of national fashion integration on destination image. It also considers the perceptions of tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives regarding implementation barriers in Uzbekistan. For this purpose, participants from two stakeholder groups, namely tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives, were purposively selected and studied using AHP–SEM methods.

The integrated AHP–SEM approach provides a framework for interpreting stakeholder judgments and modeling relationships as structural paths to support tourism-market decisions. The current study assumes that empirical findings may differ if the research is conducted in another region, tourism market, stakeholder group, or cultural setting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines implementation barriers related to the integration of national fashion elements among key tourism stakeholders in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In the Uzbek cultural tourism context, tourism educators face certain challenges in teaching national fashion elements to tourism learners, particularly when traditional design features are used as part of destination branding and visitor experience.

A total of 200 questionnaire responses were obtained from two stakeholder groups involved in national fashion integration. Participants were selected through relevant institutions, and the research team conducted stakeholder interviews and pairwise comparisons using structured closed-ended questions. The study adopted a stratified purposive sampling approach and selected 200 professionally active participants from an interdisciplinary tourism and fashion program. It was ensured that the sample members possessed a sufficient level of theoretical and practical knowledge of national fashion.

The participants' previous professional experience was also considered to ensure that they had participated in at least two cultural tourism projects. From the participants' perspective, the selection of national fashion elements had to be relevant to their professional roles or practical knowledge of their suitability for tourism product development. Based on their expertise, the survey questions were limited to closed-ended items, and several ambiguous questions were removed. This made it possible to validate the findings of the quantitative analysis [5,6,7].

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of the integrated AHP–SEM method. The research design included a questionnaire consisting of respondent profiles, Likert-scale items, and a pairwise comparison matrix for analysis [8]. Among the two SEM approaches, namely covariance-based SEM and partial least squares SEM, this study applied the covariance-based approach, as it enables the estimation of structural relationships using maximum likelihood estimation.

For SEM measurement, the questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale reflecting the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with statements concerning the role of national fashion elements in learning cultural heritage. The questionnaire was implemented in three stages. The first stage covered the demographic profiling of participants' professional backgrounds. The second stage focused on barriers identified in the tourism market. The third stage included the AHP matrix, which contained pairwise comparisons related to the strategies selected by the respondents.

Accordingly, the researchers conducted SEM estimation while simultaneously deriving priorities from AHP pairwise comparison matrices for assessing heritage authenticity, commercial commodification, and hybrid cultural branding. A member-checking session was also conducted with the same randomly selected participants after the interpretation of the SEM findings. Convergent validity was assessed by examining each

standardized indicator loading, with an acceptable threshold value greater than 0.50.

This means that any indicator with a loading value of 0.50 or higher was regarded as acceptable and retained, while indicators with loading values below 0.50 were considered inadequate and removed. The reliability coefficient met the threshold value of 0.70, confirming internal consistency. SEM path results were also examined and confirmed the statistical significance of the main relationships. Since the priorities were determined by experts and their judgments were numerically represented by weights, special attention was paid to the consistency ratio in the AHP analysis.

Thus, this paper conducted a quantitative study using the AHP technique, one of the multi-criteria decision-making methods, to analyze implementation barriers from the stakeholder perspective. Higher factor loadings indicated latent features common among the indicators. Based on the analysis of the responses, two types of variables were identified: exogenous variables representing enabling conditions and endogenous variables related to tourism outcomes.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections, each containing several items related to cultural training, heritage symbolism, and their linkages with approaches to teaching national fashion elements. The range of significant coefficients was from 0.356 to 0.600, whereas the range of nonsignificant coefficients was from -0.016 to 0.043. Descriptive statistics showed the frequency and distribution of responses, while inferential statistics explained the relationships among variables using coefficients, standard errors, z-values, p-values, and other model-fit measures.

The strategy items were then subjected to AHP analysis, which resulted in normalized values of 0.3549, 0.3496, and 0.2955 for the three sections of the decision hierarchy, with an overall value of 1.0000. These procedures are necessary for a study containing endogenous and exogenous variables, observed indicators, and structurally related constructs.

However, the wording and ordering of the questionnaire items and AHP comparisons were modified because they were context-specific and derived from the researchers' preliminary review of national fashion literature prior to the survey. A validation discussion was also conducted with 20 randomly selected stakeholders after the interpretation of the combined findings. This provided an opportunity to triangulate the findings of the quantitative study [11,12].

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Accordingly, the visitor-experience-oriented use of national fashion elements in the cultural interpretation process produced a statistically significant change in cultural interpretation skills ($z = 5.03$, $p = 0.000$). The results indicate that the use of formal cultural training did not have a significant effect on destination memorability in tourism services and destination branding. However, the use of heritage-symbolism-oriented national fashion elements in the destination image model was significant, indicating a statistically meaningful difference in destination memorability scores (Table 1).

Table 1. National Fashion Elements in the Competitiveness of Uzbekistan's Tourism Sector: AHP/ANP Priority Analysis¹

Element	Commercial Commodification	Cultural Heritage Authenticity наследия	Hybrid Cultural Branding	Cultural Authenticity Premium аутентичность	Market Demand Sustainability	Policy and Institutional Alignment соответствие	Tourism Competitiveness	Goal
Commercial Commodification	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,615	0,615	0,091	0,077	0,175
Cultural Heritage Authenticity	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,066	0,319	0,727	0,308	0,177
Hybrid Cultural Branding	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,319	0,066	0,182	0,615	0,148
Cultural Authenticity Premium	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,125
Market Demand Sustainability	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,125
Policy and Institutional Alignment	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,125
Tourism Competitiveness	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,125
Goal	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000

¹ author's development

Table 2. Table of synthesized priorities — national fashion elements in the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's tourism sector (AHP) ²

Alternative	Rank	Ideal values	Normalized values	Raw values
Cultural heritage authenticity strategy	1	1,0000	0,3549	0,1775
Commercial commodification strategy	2	0,9851	0,3496	0,1748
Hybrid cultural branding strategy	3	0,8325	0,2955	0,1477

Table 2 provides evidence that the priority of heritage authenticity was not statistically significantly higher than the priority of commercial commodification strategies, although its mean normalized score was higher (U = not reported, p = not reported). The results show that, before significance testing, the formal cultural training path had a lower total coefficient than the heritage symbolism preservation path. After significance testing, it also had a higher total p-value in the second comparison.

The results indicate that the mean normalized priority value for the selected cultural heritage authenticity strategy was 0.3549, while the normalized priority value for hybrid cultural branding was 0.2955. The maximum-likelihood SEM results revealed a statistically significant change in fashion training availability after multi-week practice ($z = 12.62$, $p = 0.000$).

Table 2 also shows that the priority of commercial commodification was not statistically significantly higher than that of hybrid cultural branding strategies, although its mean ideal score was higher (U = not reported, p = not reported). The results further indicate that the use of heritage-symbolism preservation did not significantly affect cultural interpretation skills in the visitor-experience and cultural-learning process (Table 3).

Table 3. Structural Equation Model of National Fashion-Related Factors Influencing Destination Memorability, Cultural Interpretation Skill, and Local Fashion Purchase Intention³

		OIM				
	Coef.	Std.Err.	z	P>z	[95%Conf.	Interval]
Structural						
destination_memorability						
formal_cultural_training	0.043	0.072	0.600	0.551	-0.099	0.185
heritage_symbolism_preservation	0.356	0.064	5.560	0.000	0.230	0.481
_cons	2.184	0.207	10.530	0.000	1.777	2.590
cultural_interpretation_skill						
heritage_symbolism_preservation	0.131	0.072	1.810	0.071	-0.011	0.273
_cons	2.896	0.239	12.120	0.000	2.428	3.365
local_fashion_purchase_intent						
destination_memorability	0.553	0.060	9.260	0.000	0.436	0.670
_cons	1.505	0.203	7.400	0.000	1.107	1.904
fashion_training_availability						
cultural_interpretation_skill	0.600	0.048	12.620	0.000	0.507	0.693
_cons	1.361	0.160	8.490	0.000	1.047	1.675
var(e.destination_memorability)	0.253	0.025		0.208	0.308	
var(e.cultural_interpretation_skill)	0.336	0.034		0.276	0.409	
var(e.local_fashion_purchase_intent)	0.211	0.021		0.174	0.257	
var(e.fashion_training_availability)	0.154	0.015		0.127	0.188	

LR test of model vs. saturated: $\chi^2(13) = 115.43$, Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$

Exogenous variables

² author's development

³ author's development

Number of obs = 200
 Observed: formal_cultural_training heritage_symbolism_preservation visitor_experience_integration
 Fitting target model:
 Iteration 0: log likelihood = -1013.5025
 Iteration 1: log likelihood = -1013.5025
 Structural equation model
 Estimation method = ml
 Log likelihood = -1013.5025

This may be explained by the professional training process and the use of closed-ended instruments during the survey and pairwise comparison procedures, primarily due to context-specific stakeholder judgments. Although the priority weights of most items in the AHP hierarchy showed a positive increase, these results may indicate that the number of respondents who believed that the use of national fashion elements would be beneficial in tourism education and destination branding was not significantly higher than the number of those who held a different view (Figure 1).

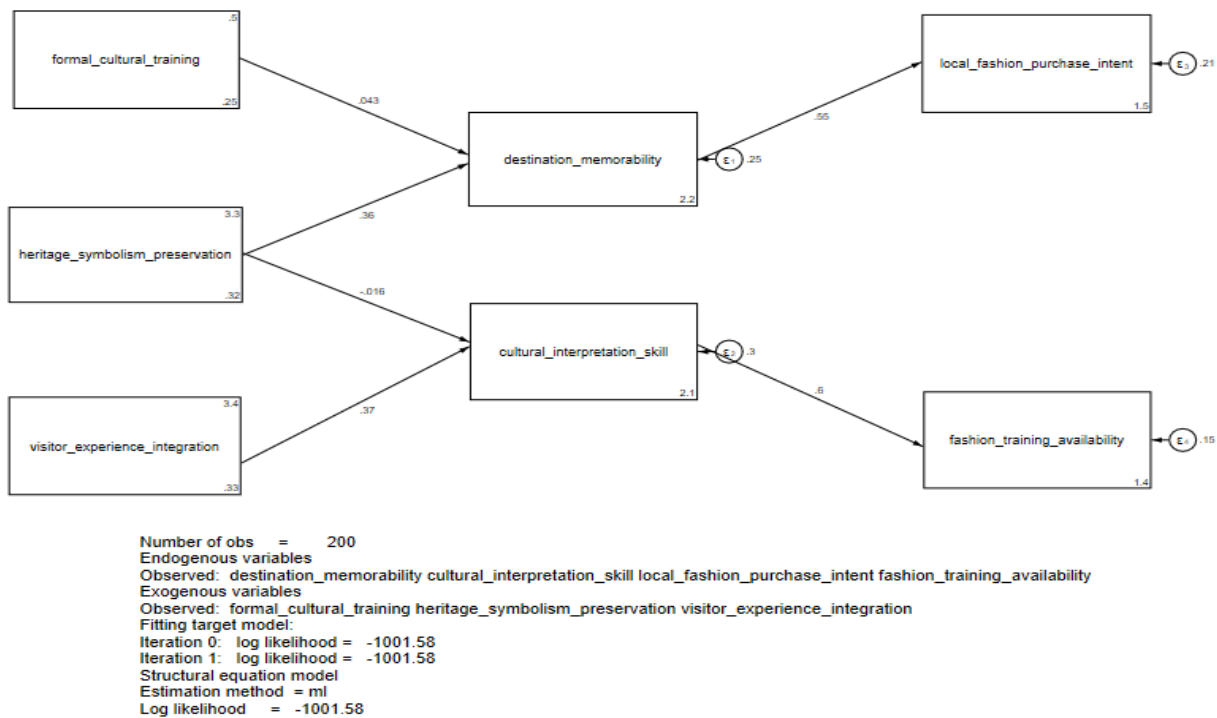


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model of National Fashion-Related Factors Influencing Destination Memorability, Cultural Interpretation Skills, and Local Fashion Purchase Intention⁴

Finally, the number of respondents who stated that national fashion elements had a positive effect on learning did not increase significantly from the initial survey to the follow-up discussion. In addition, the differences between the two groups were significant, as the highest normalized priority value was 0.3549 and the lowest normalized priority value was 0.2955.

Table 2 provides evidence that the priority of heritage authenticity was not statistically significantly higher than that of hybrid cultural branding strategies, although the mean raw score was higher (U = not reported, p = not reported). Analysis of variance should be used to compare the strategy-priority structure across two or more mean values, namely heritage authenticity, commercial commodification, and hybrid cultural branding.

Visual materials were one of the most important components of the analysis, as they highlighted several key issues related to the integration of national fashion elements into the tourism market [1–5]. Therefore, this study also identified effective ways to improve the cultural competence of tourism specialists so that they can integrate national fashion elements into the tourism market more productively and support tourists in learning about national fashion heritage. The findings showed that participants from the tourism management field, as well as representatives of fashion and handicraft enterprises, believed that an effective training framework should be implemented in a more coordinated manner.

⁴ author's development

The study also showed that the response priority patterns of the two stakeholder groups, namely tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives, differed from each other. Moreover, the mean score for the heritage-authenticity strategy in the AHP synthesis results between heritage authenticity and hybrid cultural branding was higher. However, the heritage-authenticity weights were not statistically significantly higher than the hybrid-branding weights according to the Mann–Whitney U test (U = not reported, p = not reported).

It was observed that tourism educators prepared a national fashion lesson before each training session. However, learners were not always motivated to study regional costume symbolism, as they were accustomed to their existing practices, and the training activities did not sufficiently encourage them to develop interest in national fashion elements [6–8,15].

The results indicated a statistically significant difference due to the use of visitor-experience integration in the cultural interpretation model. The study also suggested that AHP comparison settings based on the professional-affiliation variable created moderate variation in strategy-priority judgments between tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives.

These findings suggest that heritage symbolism had stronger effects than formal cultural training because national fashion symbols are visually recognizable, easier to interpret and remember, and should not be treated merely as decorative objects [1,9,13]. The findings also showed that destination memorability plays a significant role in the formation of local fashion purchase intention as a tourism-market outcome.

The use of visitor-experience integration over several weeks in national fashion training sessions produced a statistically significant difference in cultural-interpretation scores, as shown by the SEM z-test ($z = 5.03$, $p = 0.000$). Moreover, daily practice in national fashion interpretation led to a statistically significant difference in fashion-training availability. The results after multi-week practice, without the use of formal cultural training in the destination-memorability model, also showed a statistically significant change in heritage-symbolism effects ($z = 5.56$, $p = 0.000$).

If tourism specialists are to address challenges related to regular access to authentic fashion materials under current training constraints caused by limited institutional support, the use of visual resources may offer a practical solution for cultural-fashion instruction. Tourism educators should also apply visitor-experience-based methods to teach national fashion elements so that learners can remember cultural meanings for a longer period [15].

Moreover, the mean priority for the commercial-commodification strategy in the AHP synthesis results between commercial commodification and hybrid cultural branding was higher. However, the commercial-commodification weights were not statistically significantly higher than the hybrid-branding weights according to the Mann–Whitney U test (U = not reported, p = not reported).

Similar findings were reported by Fayzullaev et al. and Jeong et al. [4,6] in cultural tourism studies, which showed that cultural tourism development can improve quality of life. Zhong et al. [15] explained that tourists used traditional-costume activities more commonly than formal cultural instruction; therefore, experiential responses were stronger than classroom-based responses. In addition, Jeong et al. [6] noted that the variability of stakeholder responses to culturalization strategies under tourism-market conditions may be explained by the fact that tourism enterprises use commercial promotion and visitor engagement more actively than professional training and institutional coordination.

Despite the advantages of visual-resource use, such as easy access to photographs, digital catalogues, and regional ornament archives for cultural interpretation and tourism-product design, participants also reported certain limitations. These included limited tactile experience, difficulties in working with digital costume materials without stable internet access, copyright restrictions, the need to use new software tools, and insufficient hands-on interaction with physical costumes. However, this does not mean that tourism specialists cannot overcome these challenges with appropriate training and practical experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of visual resources provided tourism specialists and fashion-sector representatives with opportunities that would otherwise have been limited. However, serious concerns remain regarding the use of digital costume materials in national fashion training instead of authentic physical costumes.

The findings revealed that fashion-related visual media clearly illustrates the challenges associated with the global expansion of cultural tourism. Although participants were aware of the basic visual uses of national fashion elements in the classroom, more comprehensive training on the various applications of national fashion resources, particularly in relation to cultural interpretation skills, would help them adapt to different practical situations. Such training could also support stronger motivation among participants during follow-up activities.

In addition, the issues related to organizing national fashion programs and their practical sessions demonstrate broader concerns regarding cultural authenticity and tourism-market commodification. Therefore,

it is necessary to strengthen institutional support, expand access to authentic fashion materials, develop practice-oriented training modules, and improve cooperation between tourism education institutions, fashion-sector representatives, and handicraft enterprises.

A larger multi-regional stakeholder sample in future studies would provide clearer results for understanding the impact of national fashion element use on cultural interpretation skills and local fashion purchase intention.

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