

BODY REPRESENTATION IN BALINESE CULTURAL TOURISM: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY ON SYMBOLISM AND COMMODIFICATION

Anggara Putu Dharma Putra¹

¹Doctoral Program in Religious Studies, Postgraduate Program of I Gusti Bagus
Sugriwa State Hindu University Denpasar, Denpasar, Bali, 80237, Indonesia.

*Correspondence: ankgafdd@uhnsugriwa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study addresses the growing importance of body representation within Balinese cultural tourism, where sacred Hindu aesthetics intersect with global tourism economies. While existing literature often emphasizes either symbolic meanings of the body in religious contexts or its commodification in tourism industries, a critical gap remains in understanding how these dimensions coexist and are negotiated in practice. This research aims to examine how the Balinese female body is constructed, represented, and commodified within cultural tourism spaces that simultaneously embody spirituality and commercial exchange. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in critical ethnography, the study was conducted over six months in Ubud, Seminyak, and Sanur (Denpasar). Data were collected through participant observation, 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, and document and media analysis. Field notes, interview transcripts, and visual-cultural materials were analyzed using thematic and symbolic interpretation supported by qualitative data software. The findings reveal that the female body in Balinese tourism operates as a hybrid cultural entity, functioning simultaneously as a sacred symbol in ritual contexts and as a commodified object within tourism and sexual economies. In ritual spaces, the body embodies spiritual values, purity, and cosmological harmony, while in tourism performances and spa industries, it is reframed as aesthetic and sensual capital. The study further identifies how sex workers actively negotiate identity and agency by appropriating cultural symbols, spiritual narratives, and traditional aesthetics to meet tourist expectations while maintaining personal boundaries. This duality produces a moral ambiguity within local communities, where the coexistence of sacred and profane practices is often tolerated through flexible cultural frameworks and economic considerations. The spatial and symbolic proximity between temples, spas, and nightlife venues further illustrates the blurred boundaries between spirituality and commodification. The study demonstrates that body representation in Balinese cultural tourism is not merely a process of sexualization but a complex reconfiguration of symbolic, economic, and cultural meanings. The body emerges as a contested site where religious values, global capitalism, and local agency intersect. This research contributes to anthropological discourse by proposing an integrated framework that bridges symbolic anthropology and tourism commodification, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive and ethically grounded approaches in managing tourism development in Bali.

Keywords: *balinese cultural tourism; body commodification; cultural symbolism; sex tourism; symbolic anthropology*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has long played a fundamental role in constructing Bali's image as a "paradise island," offering not only exotic natural beauty and local wisdom but also a deeply embedded spirituality that is integrated into the lives of the Balinese Hindu community (Suartika, 2019). The representation of Bali as a sacred and tranquil retreat is, in fact, the result of historical and discursive constructions shaped by colonial narratives, global media reproduction, and government policy interventions in the development of the tourism sector (Kencana et al., 2019). Within this landscape, the human body particularly the Balinese female body is frequently re-presented as an inherent component of a cultural panorama designed for tourist consumption. The body is not merely displayed as a visual object in dances and ritual practices but is also subjected to processes of symbolization and commodification within the framework of the tourism economy (Wibawa & Budiasa, 2018). Beneath the constructed image of spirituality and harmony lies a structural tension between traditional values, religious norms, and global economic pressures, which in turn generates new configurations of social relations, especially when the body functions as a medium for the exchange of value and pleasure.

Commercial sex practices in Bali are not a new phenomenon; however, over the past two decades, they have demonstrated an increasing tendency toward organization, concealment, and integration into the cultural tourism system (Hoque et al., 2020). A number of anthropological studies reveal that sex workers, both local and migrant, have become embedded within a tourism ecosystem that paradoxically offers both spirituality and bodily pleasure (Berdychevsky et al., 2014, Scott, 1995). In the Balinese context, these practices occur within a society that continues to uphold the values of Hindu Dresta Bali, where the sanctity of the body especially the female body is regarded as a crucial element in maintaining cosmic harmony and collective morality (Sujana, 2018, Pedersen, 2002). The tension between religious norms and the economic practices of sex gives rise to a complex and ambivalent social space in which the body simultaneously operates as a sacred subject and an economic object.

The central issue of this study lies in understanding how the body particularly the Balinese female body undergoes a transformation of meaning within the arena of cultural tourism, which is inherently religious in character yet simultaneously provides space for profane practices such as disguised prostitution. This transformation extends beyond individual and economic dimensions, encompassing broader shifts in the symbolic structure of society. On the one hand, the body is positioned as a sacred symbol utilized in religious ceremonies and rituals; on the other hand, it may shift function to become an instrument for the exchange of economic value within the context of erotic tourism packaged as "culture." This raises critical questions regarding how Balinese society interprets such ambiguity, and how the body operates as both a medium of representation and a site of resistance within an evolving value system.

Solutions commonly proposed in public discourse and policy tend to be normative and moralistic in nature, emphasizing the reinforcement of traditional and religious values, the prohibition of women's exploitation, and strict regulation of the nightlife industry. However, such approaches often fail to capture the social realities on the ground, primarily because they overlook the structural and economic dynamics that underpin prostitution practices within cultural tourism spaces (Destanto, 2022, Reza, 2020, Tapparan et al., 2022). From the perspective of contemporary anthropology, prostitution cannot be reduced merely to moral deviance or individual aberration; rather, it should be understood as a response to economic inequality, existential voids, and the opportunities generated by the tourism industry.

Furthermore, several recent studies indicate a rearticulation of the meaning of the body within complex tourism contexts, where female sex workers are no longer positioned solely as objects of exploitation but also as agents who actively navigate economic opportunities and negotiate their identities (Berdychevsky et al., 2014, Carrier-Moisan, 2015, Cohen, 2001). In the case of Bali, the body serves not only as a point of intersection between the sacred and the profane but also as a key site for understanding the reconstruction of cultural identity within the dynamics of globalization. This occurs particularly when cultural tourism narratives present the body as part of local aesthetics, while at the same time incorporating it into transnational and often informal labor systems.

Some ethnographic literature further demonstrates that sex workers in spiritual tourism destinations often utilize local cultural symbols as adaptive strategies to meet market demands while simultaneously protecting themselves from social stigma (Sulistyanto et al., 2022, Berdychevsky et al., 2014). The commodified body is thus inseparable from cultural symbolic constructions, yet it operates dynamically within them through creative and sometimes subversive practices. Therefore, an anthropological approach to the issue of prostitution in Bali requires a more holistic and context-sensitive perspective that acknowledges the interplay between local realities and interconnected global dynamics.

Although several significant studies have examined the relationship between sex and tourism (Seuken, 2019, Hoque et al., 2020, Robinson & Meaton, 2005), relatively few explicitly connect this issue to the symbolic construction of the body within the context of Balinese Hindu society. This gap highlights the urgency of research that does not rely solely on economic or criminological perspectives but also integrates the symbolic and religious dimensions of the body within local cultural frameworks. This is particularly important given that, in Balinese Hindu culture, the body is not merely a biological entity but also a vehicle for ritual, a medium of karma, and a reflection of cosmological order. When the body enters the economic circuits of tourism, it not only undergoes a functional transformation but also carries symbolic interpretations that have the potential to challenge and even reconfigure established value systems.

Based on the literature review and preliminary field findings, this study aims to investigate how the body particularly the female body is conceptualized, enacted, and commodified within religiously grounded cultural tourism spaces in Bali. The research is specifically conducted in Ubud, Seminyak, and Sanur (Denpasar), which were purposively selected due to their distinct yet interconnected tourism characteristics. Ubud represents a center of spiritual and cultural tourism rooted in ritual practices and artistic performances; Seminyak reflects a cosmopolitan tourism hub marked by the convergence of lifestyle consumption, nightlife, and global leisure culture; while Sanur embodies a hybrid space where traditional coastal life intersects with more subtle and domesticated forms of tourism development. These three sites collectively provide a comparative framework to examine the varying configurations of sacredness, commodification, and bodily representation across different tourism landscapes in Bali.

This study addresses the central research question: how is the female body negotiated as both a sacred symbol and an economic commodity within the context of Balinese cultural tourism? In doing so, it explores how the relationship between sacred values and the political economy of the body is continuously reshaped through interactions among tourists, sex workers, and local communities, resulting in the production of complex and often contradictory cultural identities.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which brings together Hindu symbolic anthropology and the study of sexual economies within tourism contexts. By positioning the body as a critical site where symbolic meaning and economic value intersect, this study contributes to advancing theoretical discussions on bodily dynamics in societies simultaneously experiencing the pressures of globalization, tourism expansion, and transformations in religious values. Methodologically, the study encompasses ethnographic observation, analysis of cultural discourses, and critical reflection on the representation of the body as manifested in social practices and religious narratives within contemporary Balinese society.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in critical ethnography to examine the symbolic, social, and economic dynamics of the body within cultural tourism contexts that intersect with commercial sex practices in Bali. The primary objective of this approach is to uncover the complexities of meaning embedded in the body within Balinese Hindu society, particularly as it engages with the forces of globalization and the tourism economy.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation. First, participant observation was conducted in selected tourism sites, allowing the researcher to directly engage with social interactions, ritual practices, and tourism activities involving body representation. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants, including local community members, tourism workers, and individuals involved in the informal tourism and sexual economy. These interviews were designed to explore personal experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to the negotiation of body meanings. Third, document and cultural discourse analysis was employed to examine tourism narratives, media representations, and policy texts that shape the construction of the body in public discourse.

The data analysis process followed a thematic and interpretive strategy. All field notes and interview transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, categories, and meanings related to body symbolism and commodification. This was complemented by symbolic interpretation to understand how cultural values, religious beliefs, and economic practices intersect in shaping bodily representations. Triangulation across data sources was applied to enhance validity, while reflexive analysis was used to critically position the researcher within the field.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a holistic and critically informed account of how the body is constructed, represented, and commodified within a cultural space that simultaneously embodies sacred and profane dimensions.

2.1 Research Approach and Paradigm

This research uses a symbolic anthropology and critical phenomenology approach, based on an interpretive constructivism paradigm. This paradigm is based on the assumption that social reality is formed through symbolic interpretation processes carried out by individuals and groups in specific historical and cultural contexts (Putro, 2020, Negara, 2008, Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025). In the context of this research, the body is understood not only as a biological object but as a social and symbolic construction that has certain cultural, spiritual, and economic values. This

approach allows researchers to capture the layers of meaning hidden behind body practices, both sacred in Hindu rituals and profane in the context of commercial sex.

2.2 Research Location and Context

This research was carried out in three main areas in Bali which have different characteristics in the landscape of tourism and commercial sex practices, namely: Ubud, Seminyak and Sanur (Denpasar). Ubud was chosen because it is a center of cultural and spiritual tourism that emphasizes Bali's image as a center for healing and yoga. On the other hand, Seminyak represents the modern and hedonistic face of Bali, where luxury tourism and nightlife are thriving. Meanwhile, Sanur (Denpasar) as an urban center displays complex dynamics between local life and global influences, including disguised sex practices that are not explicitly tied to the formal tourism industry but still operate under the radar. The selection of this location is based on the principle of purposive sampling which allows comparative exploration of the meaning of the body in different social and spatial configurations.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques and Process

Data collection was carried out through several main techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document and media analysis. Each technique was used to capture the complexity of the phenomenon from various perspectives.

2.3.1 Participatory Observation

Observations were made for approximately 6 months, with periodic visits to predetermined locations. The researcher sought to blend in with local activities, participate in religious rites, interact with local communities, and observe interactions between sex workers, tourists, and local people in public and private spaces. Field notes were compiled systematically and reflectively, emphasizing bodily experiences, symbolic expressions, and social signs that emerged in daily life.

2.3.2 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 27 key informants representing diverse stakeholder groups relevant to the study. These included ten sex workers, seven traditional and religious leaders within Balinese Hindu society, five tourism business actors, three local government officials involved in tourism and public order, and two female activists affiliated with non-governmental organizations focusing on reproductive health and human rights. This composition of participants was purposively selected to capture a wide range of perspectives on the intersection of body, spirituality, and economic practices within cultural tourism contexts.

All interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality and encourage openness, with each session lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes. With the consent of participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of the data. The interview process was guided by a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants. The discussions primarily focused on lived bodily experiences, interpretations of sacredness and sexuality, and perceptions of the role of religion and culture in shaping and legitimizing commercial sex practices.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, involving systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns and meanings. This process enabled the identification of key themes related to body

representation, symbolic values, and socio-economic dynamics within the broader framework of Balinese cultural tourism.

2.3.3 Document and Media Analysis

To support primary data, the researcher also collected secondary data in the form of tourism policy documents, local and international media news, travel brochures, social media accounts of sex workers and travel agents, and relevant Balinese Hindu ritual texts. All documents were analyzed using semiotic and critical discourse approaches (Bm, 2020, Fadli et al., 2022) to understand the symbolic construction of the body in the public sphere.

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis methods, with the stages of: data organization, pattern and theme searching, thematic interpretation, and integration of results in a theoretical framework. The analysis was carried out with the help of NVivo software to map the relationships between the themes that emerged in interviews, observations, and documents. The main focus of this analysis is how the body is understood, interpreted, and utilized in the context of interactions between Balinese Hindu values and the tourism economy.

During the analysis process, the researcher used the principle of source and technique triangulation to increase data validity. Interpretations were not only taken from one type of data but were validated by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documents. In addition, member checking was carried out with several key informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation did not deviate from the experiences and meanings intended by the sources.

2.5 Research Ethics

This research was conducted with full attention to the principles of social research ethics, including participant consent, confidentiality of identity, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. All informants were given written and verbal explanations regarding the purpose of the research, the use of data, and their rights as participants. Names and locations were disguised to protect the identities of individuals and groups at risk. In addition, the researcher avoided judgmental or coercive questions in the interview process, especially towards vulnerable groups such as sex workers.

The researcher also maintained reflexivity during the research process, recognizing that the researcher's social position, gender, and academic background could influence relations with informants and data interpretation. Therefore, the researcher continuously engaged in critical reflection on field experiences and distanced themselves from moral or ideological biases that could interfere with the integrity of the analysis.

2.6 Research Limitations

Like other qualitative research, this study has several limitations. First, because it is a case study and limited to three main locations in Bali, the findings cannot be generalized to all regions or other Indonesian contexts. Second, limited access to very closed covert sex practices required the researcher to rely on oral narratives and indirect observation. Third, the aspects of spirituality and the sacredness of the body are very sensitive and complex themes, so interpretations are always contextual and open to other interpretations.

Nevertheless, the strength of this research lies in the depth of ethnographic description and sensitivity of analysis towards local and global dynamics, symbolic

and economic, as well as religious and profane, which simultaneously influence body experiences in the cultural tourism space of Bali.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of ethnographic research on how the body especially the female body is conceptualized, represented, and commodified in Bali's cultural tourism space, which intersects directly or covertly with commercial sex practices. The results are analyzed and classified into four main themes: The Body as a Cultural and Religious Symbol, The Body as a Commodity in the Tourism Economy, Negotiation of Identity and Agency of Sex Workers, and Moral Ambiguity and Social Response to the Sexualization of the Body in the Sacred Realm. Each theme is built on triangulation between field observation data, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis from media and documents.

3.1 The Body as a Cultural and Religious Symbol

In the Balinese Hindu tradition, the body is not viewed merely as a material entity but as an integral part of the cosmological and moral system. The female body, in particular, is associated with purity, harmony, and a spiritual role in rituals such as metatah (tooth filing), first menstruation, and self-cleansing before yadnya (sacrifice) (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, 2020) (Sridhar, 2019) (Pedersen, 2002). Field findings indicate that in cultural performances like the Pendet dance, the female body is not just an aesthetic medium but also a carrier of spiritual energy (taksu) believed to connect humans with unseen powers.

However, a paradox emerges when the same body appears in dance performances staged in hotels or restaurants for tourist audiences. In such contexts, the body is often reframed through visual aesthetics, seemingly detached from its original sacred associations. A dancer interviewed in Ubud described her experience as "living in two worlds": one as a wali dancer performing in temple ceremonies, and the other as a paid evening entertainer. Importantly, this duality is not inherently inscribed in the female body itself, but rather in the shifting contexts and meanings of the dance as a performative practice. The same bodily gestures and movements may carry sacred significance in ritual settings, while being reinterpreted as entertainment within commercial spaces. Therefore, the attribution of negative connotations cannot be simplistically imposed on the female body; instead, it is the transformation of context, audience, and intention that redefines the meaning of the performance. This distinction highlights that the ambiguity lies in the cultural framing of the dance rather than in the body as an object, revealing a more nuanced understanding of how sacredness and commodification coexist within Balinese cultural tourism.

3.2 The Body as a Commodity in the Tourism Economy

The commodification of the body in the context of Balinese tourism emerges not only explicitly in the nightlife industry but also through the narrative of "spiritual and sensual balance" marketed in holistic tour packages such as spiritual spas, yoga retreats, and Ayurveda-based body therapies. Field observations in Seminyak and Denpasar revealed that massage and healing touch services often serve as a front for covert sex practices offered to foreign tourists. Brochures listing "full body treatment" or "exclusive private energy transfer" are often used as codes referring to additional sexual services.

In interviews, one former spa worker explained how Western clients often requested "healing with energy contact," and the management not only condoned it but

also set high rates. The female body in this context becomes a product wrapped in the discourse of spirituality and local culture. Figure 1 below shows a marketing visualization of a spa in Seminyak that mixes Hindu symbols such as lotus, mandala, and Dewi Saraswati with the sensual appearance of Balinese women.



Figure 1. Spa Brochure with Cultural Symbols and Sexualized Visuals
Caption: The use of sacred Hindu symbols to market spa services that lead to the commodification of the female body in spiritual packaging.

This reality aligns with the findings of Juniarta, Nilsen, and Sastre, which show that the body in the global sex industry is often wrapped in narratives that mask exploitation through cultural and spiritual symbols (Sastre, 2014, Juniarta, 2020, Nilsen, 2013).

3.3 Negotiation of Identity and Agency of Sex Workers

One significant finding of this research is how sex workers in Bali do not always position themselves as victims but rather as agents who actively navigate power relations, identities, and economic opportunities. In interviews with several sex workers in Denpasar and Seminyak, it was found that they have a reflective awareness of their social roles and how their bodies function in transactional relationships with foreign tourists.

Informant from Banyuwangi who has worked for five years as a freelance escort stated that she uses Balinese cultural symbols such as flowers in her ear, polite language, and the term "good karma" to attract foreign clients looking for an "authentic Balinese experience." Her body is positioned as a cultural medium, not just a biological tool. She stated: "Westerners like it when we look traditional, wearing flowers and kain. But after that, they ask for more. I play with that."

This negotiation shows that sex workers also exploit stereotypes and cultural expectations brought by tourists while negotiating autonomy and boundaries in their practices. Table 1 below shows the categories of self-representation of sex workers based on interview data.

Table 1. Categories of Self-Representation among Sex Workers in Bali

Representation Category	Key Characteristics	Main Motivation	Negotiation Strategy
Spiritual Agent	Uses Hindu symbols and healing narratives	Avoiding stigma, attracting specific clients	Karma narratives, mystical experiences
Traditional Woman	Modest clothing and demeanor, refers to self as “companion”	Wants to be seen as respectable	Avoids “sex worker” label, claims “not selling body”
Urban Professional	Open about sex, modern style	Income-oriented	Honest and direct economic contracts

This table shows the spectrum of identities constructed by sex workers and how their bodies become the locus of various non-singular identifications. This supports Sanders' argument that sex workers are not passive subjects but social actors with cultural strategies (Sanders, 2005).

This study underscores the complexity of their agency in an environment where their bodies are often defined by dominant tourism narratives (Wardhana et al., 2021). Previous studies have also revealed that prostitution practice networks often involve various parties, including service users, entertainment business owners, and local communities, all of whom are involved due to shared economic interests (Roem, 2022). This involvement creates complex social dynamics, changes in traditional value systems, and new challenges in protecting vulnerable groups (Suryandari & Hidayatullah, 2020). This study reinforces that prostitution typology is not monolithic but ranges from casual to organized practices that progressively utilize digital platforms to facilitate transactions and increase service delocalization (Humsona et al., 2020, Matolcsi et al., 2020). This phenomenon of prostitution delocalization, as explained by Giddens, shows how these practices are no longer tied to specific physical locations but adapt to technological developments and global communication networks (M & Umam, 2020).

3.4 Moral Ambiguity and Social Response to the Sexualization of the Body

The ambiguity of the body as a symbol and commodity is also reflected in the response of the Balinese community. On the one hand, there is moral resistance to covert sexual practices that are considered to pollute Bali's sanctity. On the other hand, the local community also takes part in the tourism economy, either as service providers, protectors of practices, or simply allowing it for economic considerations.

An interviewed traditional leader in Ubud revealed that practices such as "pijat plus-plus" (massage with extras) are difficult to eradicate because the perpetrators are often newcomers living in local residents' boarding houses. When asked about the spiritual implications of the practice, he replied: "That's a matter of individual karma. The important thing is that the temple is maintained, and customs are carried out." This statement indicates a separation between the profane and sacred realms in daily life, which allows sexual practices to continue to exist without causing open conflict with traditional norms.

Figure 2 below shows the location of a temple adjacent to a spa center and nightlife in Seminyak, highlighting the spatial contradiction between the sacred and the profane.

which commodification is applied in the culture-based tourism industry (Kartika et al., 2022).

3.5 Synthesis of Findings

Based on the analysis of the four themes above, it can be concluded that the body in the cultural tourism space in Bali undergoes a simultaneous transformation of meaning: as a sacred symbol, an object of aesthetics, an economic commodity, and a field for negotiating identity. This process is mediated by various actors, including sex workers, tourism industry players, traditional leaders, and tourists, who together form an ambivalent ecosystem between spirituality and sensuality.

The body becomes an arena where indigenous discourse, capitalism, and Hindu symbolism interact and mutually negotiate their boundaries. These results reinforce the idea that tourism modernity does not eliminate local values but represses them into new adaptation spaces that are complex and often contradictory. Therefore, understanding the body in this context requires an analytical lens that is capable of capturing the tension between the sacred and the secular, between tradition and commodity, between norms and agency.

DISCUSSION

This discussion aims to interpret and contextualize the ethnographic findings within the framework of relevant theories and literature, in order to explain the transformation of the body in the cultural tourism space that simultaneously touches and blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane in Bali. The discussion is structured based on four main themes that have been outlined in the results section, namely the Body as a Cultural and Religious Symbol, the Body as a Commodity in the Tourism Economy, the Negotiation of Identity and Agency of Sex Workers, and Moral Ambiguity and Social Response to the Sexualization of the Body. Each section reflects the socio-cultural and economic-political dynamics of the body in the context of the globalization of spirituality and the commodification of locality.

4.1 The Body as a Cultural and Religious Symbol

In Balinese Hindu tradition, the body is a cosmological manifestation of *bhuwana alit*, which functions as a reflection of the universal order and an instrument of ritual sanctity (Sujana, 2018, Suartika & Saputra, 2019). In the realm of ritual, the body, especially the female body, carries moral and spiritual values that are not only related to personal sanctity but also to social harmony and cosmic balance. However, in the context of tourism, the female body undergoes desecration through visual and performative reproduction that is detached from its sacred roots.

The discrepancy between the ritual body and the stage body illustrates a semiotic conflict between two systems of representation: one based on sacredness and customary norms, and the other based on aesthetics and commodification. This conflict demonstrates what is referred to as "dissonance of meaning" in symbolism studies, where cultural symbols are taken over by the economic system without regard for the sacred relations that bind them in the local social space (Karsono et al., 2020). These findings support Picard's argument that cultural tourism in Bali not only produces "culture" as a spectacle but also selects and adapts cultural values to market needs (Picard, 2008).

For example, the *pendet* dance, which was originally categorized as *wali* (sacred), has been adapted into *bebalihan* performances that are commercially staged in hotels and tourist venues. In this transformation, the dancer's body is no longer

solely a medium of taksu a spiritual charisma believed to connect the performer with divine forces but increasingly becomes an object of aesthetic consumption within the tourism economy. This shift is not merely theoretical; it is also reflected in lived experiences. One informant, a female dancer in Ubud, revealed during an interview that she feels she is “living in two different worlds” performing sacred dances in temple rituals while also dancing for tourists as a source of income. She noted that while the movements remain similar, “the feeling is different; in the temple, it is ngayah, but on stage, it is work.” This blurring of intention and context illustrates how the boundary between reverence and consumption becomes increasingly unstable. Consequently, an ontological question emerges: does the body remain sacred when its function shifts from ritual devotion to staged performance? This tension reflects a broader crisis of meaning experienced by indigenous communities when their cultural symbols are appropriated, recontextualized, and circulated within the global market system.

4.2 The Body as a Commodity in the Tourism Economy

The transformation of the body into a commodity in the tourism space does not occur in a symbolic vacuum. The commodification of the body in spiritual spas, energy therapies, and healing touch services is rooted in a process of hybridization between local values and the logic of the global economy. This is in line with the concept of "spiritual tourism" proposed by Timothy and Olsen, where the spiritual quest is packaged in the format of a commercial experience, making the body a vehicle for symbolic and sensual consumption simultaneously (Rifa'i & Kamaludin, 2021, Robledo, 2015).

This condition not only gives rise to the commodification of the female body but also inserts narrative and symbolic dimensions to disguise commercial sex practices. Symbols such as frangipani flowers, incense, or Hindu mantras are used to add a "sacred nuance" to services that are implicitly sexual. Figure 1 in the previous results section shows how spiritual aesthetics are used in spa brochures to convey sensual offers implicitly. This is a semiotic practice referred to by Baudrillard as “simulacra”, the creation of signs that mimic reality but no longer have reference to their original reality (Safitri et al., 2023, As et al., 2020).

In the Balinese context, this simulation of sacredness becomes a form of double commodification: the body is not only sold as a sexual object but also as a representation of local spirituality. This process is not merely discursive but grounded in lived practices. An informant working in a spa in Seminyak explained that foreign clients often seek “spiritual experiences” that involve bodily intimacy, such as requests framed as “energy healing” or “chakra alignment,” which in practice may include sensual touch. She noted that management encourages therapists to incorporate elements such as incense, mantras, and traditional attire to enhance the “authentic Balinese” atmosphere, even when the service extends beyond therapeutic boundaries. In her words, “they come for healing, but sometimes they expect more and we are trained to package it in a spiritual way.” This illustrates how the female body becomes a meeting point between traditional values and market demands, making it simultaneously a cultural symbol and a means of capital production within the global tourism economy.

4.3 Negotiation of Identity and Agency of Sex Workers

Research findings indicate that sex workers in Bali are not merely objects within the tourism economic structure but also active subjects in shaping and

negotiating their identities. This challenges the traditional view that places sex workers solely as victims of the patriarchal system or global capitalism. Instead, as Kempadoo Asmirah and Ilmamsyah asserted, sex workers are also agents who possess cultural strategies in facing and utilizing market expectations (Asmirah et al., 2023, Ilmamsyah et al., 2022, Kempadoo, 2001). These strategies include efforts to construct legitimate narratives regarding their career choices, often highlighting aspects of economic need or family responsibility as primary motivations (Jayendra & Suarmana, 2022).

In interviews, some sex workers stated that they deliberately present themselves as “authentic Balinese women” to fulfill tourists' imaginations of exoticism and local authenticity. Their bodies are arranged, adorned, and practiced in formats that can unite spiritual images with sensual services. Table 1 in the previous results section shows various self-representation strategies, from spiritual and traditional to urban professional. These strategies demonstrate a spectrum of agency, illustrating that the body is not just a traded object but also a field of identity negotiation and resistance against stereotypes.

Thus, the body of sex workers is not only a "passive commodity" but also a space for social expression. In some cases, sex workers even negotiate moral boundaries based on Hindu values, such as refusing certain services deemed *adharma*. This indicates that despite engaging in transactional sexual practices, the actors still construct internal ethics based on local values. These findings enrich the literature on women's agency in the sexual economy, particularly in a cultural context with a strong religious value system. This research indicates that economic motivation and family support are the main drivers for women to engage in this work, consistent with previous findings that highlight the role of women in increasing family income (Zunaidi & Maghfiroh, 2021). Other studies also confirm that in many cases, women work to support their families financially, which is one of the main reasons behind their participation in various economic sectors, including those considered non-traditional (Sahputra et al., 2021). This phenomenon highlights the complexity of women's identities amidst economic demands, which often require them to take on dual roles in family and society (Sulastri, 2021, Ajuna & Amri, 2021). Moreover, the shift in modern society's views regarding the role of women has also been widely acknowledged, where women are increasingly encouraged to contribute to driving the family economy, although there are still views that place women as second-class citizens. In fact, in some rural areas, patriarchal views are beginning to fade, allowing women to contribute more actively in the formal and informal sectors (Nirmalasari & Putri, 2022). Nevertheless, there are also views that limit women's roles in the public domain, especially if the work is considered contrary to traditional or religious norms, as noted by some Islamic studies that allow women to work provided they do not neglect their domestic responsibilities (Aulia et al., 2021). sex workers in Bali demonstrate a broad spectrum of agency, ranging from identity negotiation to resistance against stereotypes. This is evident in field interviews. One informant, a freelance worker in the tourism area of Kuta, stated that she consciously manages how she presents herself depending on the client, emphasizing that “I am not just what they think - I decide what I show and what I don't.” She explained that while economic necessity drives her work, she actively sets boundaries and negotiates terms, including refusing certain requests that conflict with her personal values. Another informant highlighted that she uses traditional symbols, such as wearing *kebaya* or referencing Balinese cultural identity, not merely as compliance with tourist expectations but as a strategic way to assert dignity and control over her image. These narratives indicate

that their bodies are not only traded but also become a field of symbolic resistance against patriarchal narratives that position them as passive objects.

4.4 Moral Ambiguity and Social Response to the Sexualization of the Body

The ambiguity between sacredness and profanity inherent in the body in Balinese society is not only experienced by actors in the sex industry but also by indigenous communities and religious institutions. The community's response to commercial sex practices in the tourism space indicates a tacit tolerance based on economic logic and the principle of *desa kala patra*. This principle allows for moral relaxation in certain situations, as long as it does not disrupt the ritual order and sanctity of temples.

This approach can be understood as a form of moral compartmentalization, where individuals and communities functionally divide sacred and profane spaces (Diantary, 2021). Figure 2 in the results section illustrates the spatial proximity between sacred sites and nightlife venues in Seminyak, reflecting how society coexists with contradictions without experiencing sharp moral dissonance. In interviews, some traditional leaders stated that “what matters is that traditions are maintained, and temples remain sacred,” indicating a conceptual separation between the body as a sacred vehicle and the body as an economic tool. This kind of response also indicates a flexible and dynamic “contextual ethic,” which is not black and white as often assumed in universal morality. This ethic allows communities to survive in the face of global economic pressures while maintaining social cohesion and value systems. Nevertheless, this condition also harbors the latent potential for delegitimizing traditional norms, especially if sexual practices become increasingly associated with Bali's cultural image in the eyes of outsiders.

4.5 Theoretical Synthesis and Study Contribution

This discussion shows that the body in Bali cannot be understood dichotomously as merely a sacred symbol or a profane object. The body is an entity constructed through complex symbolic, economic, and cultural relations. In the context of cultural tourism, the body functions as a “portal of meaning” that connects global market expectations and local values that are being negotiated. This research broadens the horizon of understanding about the body in the anthropology of tourism and religion, emphasizing the role of the body as a meeting point between cultural performativity, spirituality, and capitalism. These results support hybrid approaches such as those offered by Appadurai regarding global “scapes,” where culture and the body are no longer locally bound but are continuously reconstructed in fluid global networks (Wenning, 2016, White, 2010). This study shows that the commodification of culture, especially the body as a traded commodity, is an inevitable process in the tourism industry (Kartika et al., 2022). A tourism model based on the values of *Tri Hita Karana*, which includes harmonious relationships between humans and God, humans with each other, and humans with the environment, can offer a framework for managing this complexity sustainably, considering spiritual and ecological aspects in addition to economic benefits (Pujaastawa & Sudana, 2022). This research not only reveals how the body becomes an economic object in the tourism industry but also how the body itself can become a means of resistance, expression of agency, and negotiation of identity amidst economic and cultural pressures.

Methodologically, the use of critical ethnography allows for the uncovering of local narratives that are often marginalized in tourism studies that overemphasize economic or policy aspects. Meanwhile, theoretically, this discussion encourages the

development of new concepts about the "sacred-commodity body," which is a body that simultaneously bears symbolic burdens and economic potential in one entity. This concept challenges the binary separation between spirituality and materiality, highlighting how the body can be a vessel for transcendental expression as well as an arena for commercialization in the realm of tourism, which is full of religious and cultural tourism (Rifa'i & Kamaludin, 2021). Cultural tourism in Bali shows that the body, in this context, undergoes a transformation from a natural phenomenon to a cultural one, where the image of the human body has changed greatly, no longer just nudity (Mulyawan, 2021). This transformation includes performative and representational aspects, where the body becomes a medium for expressing cultural and spiritual identity, while also reflecting the dynamics of the ever-evolving global market (Pujaastawa & Sudana, 2022). Sustainable tourism based on edutourism can be a solution, as it involves preserving the values of personality and developing the nation's culture, while utilizing natural potential and beauty responsibly (Rosardi, 2021, Bian et al., 2022).

The challenge ahead is how the Balinese people can manage this ambiguity without sacrificing the integrity of local values that form the foundation of collective identity. In this case, tourism policies are not enough to regulate administratively but must involve cultural and ethnographic approaches to capture the complexity of bodily experiences and the meanings that accompany them.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the body in the context of cultural tourism in Bali constitutes a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional entity. The body does not merely function as a sacred symbol in religious practices but also as an economic commodity within the tourism industry, with both dimensions interacting through processes of social and cultural negotiation.

The shift in the meaning of the body occurs through the interaction of various actors and is not linear, but rather adaptive and contextual. The bodies of Balinese women become spaces of ambivalence that simultaneously represent and negotiate spiritual values, economic demands, and social identity. In this process, individuals-including sex workers-are not merely passive objects but active agents who possess the capacity to manage, interpret, and utilize their bodies across different contexts.

Local principles such as *desa kala patra* enable the coexistence of sacredness and profanity, allowing practices that may appear morally contradictory to be accepted within a flexible cultural framework. Therefore, the body in Bali cannot be understood dichotomously, but rather as a hybrid space that brings together spirituality, sensuality, and survival strategies within a global landscape.

Ultimately, the body is not merely a biological entity or a cultural symbol, but a "social event" that is continuously produced and negotiated within relations of power, economy, and meaning.

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