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Telephone: +974 4408 0045 | Email: [info@kataraph.com](mailto:info@kataraph.com)  
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## International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism (IMJCT)

*Published by Katara Publishing House in cooperation with Al Rayyan  
International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar.*

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### Professor Khalid Al-Sulaiti

*Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar  
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The main objective of the journal is to publish scientific research works on the subject of culture and tourism marketing that includes management trends, government policies, and the insight related to development of new technologies, methodologies and tools.

The journal seeks to provide a platform for researchers and experts in the field of culture and tourism marketing to reach a wider audience.



## About Journal

IMJCT is an international scientific journal specialized in publishing research in tourism culture and marketing, including government administration and policies, and developing new technologies, methodologies, and tools. It is published by Katara Publishing House in cooperation with Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar. The Journal publishes two issues per year and aims to provide a scientific platform that allows researchers and specialists to arbitrate and publish their scientific papers from research and studies in the field of tourism, culture, and marketing, as well as to contribute to the spread of knowledge by making these researches and studies available to the beneficiaries across this vast space.

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The journal has a huge scope as it fills a void. It will help not only students, teachers, experts and researchers who are working in this area, but also cultural and tourism institutions, organizations, NGOs, companies, and the general public to update themselves about the latest research, developments, and trends in culture and tourism marketing.

## Vision

To be a leading global scientific publishing platform in the field of tourism culture and marketing.

## Journal

- Giving the opportunity to Arab and international researchers to arbitrate and publish their research in the field of tourism culture and marketing.
- Contributing to supporting and developing the cultural field and tourism marketing through genuine and serious research studies in accordance with international standards.
- Achieving the universality of culture and tourism in accordance with the modern vision, with its professional controls and ethics.
- Creating a knowledge base for the magazine that contributes to creating a scientific reference and a solid documentary record.



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  - 5000-7000-word maximum length including references, tables, and figures.
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- The research is returned to the researchers after evaluation and arbitration for the purpose of evaluation and modification.
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- If the research is published, the researcher will be sent a letter of publication with an electronic copy of the journal in which his research was published.



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## Editorial

Dear academic and industry colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I present to you the ninth issue of the *International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism*, a joint publication of Katara Publishing House and Al Rayan International University College in partnership with the University of Derby.

Since its inception, the journal has remained committed to publishing high-quality scientific research in the fields of culture and tourism marketing, focusing on emerging management trends, government policies, and industry insights that contribute to the advancement of the tourism sector. By providing a platform for academics, government officials, and industry professionals, we continue to foster knowledge exchange and dialogue within these critical domains.

As we move forward, the tourism sector worldwide continues to evolve, facing new challenges and opportunities. This issue reflects our ongoing dedication to addressing contemporary developments in tourism and cultural marketing through insightful research and expert analysis. Our commitment to rigorous academic standards remains unwavering, ensuring that all published articles undergo a comprehensive double-blind peer review process.

We strive to enhance the efficiency of our review and publication process while maintaining the highest academic standards. Additionally, we continue to explore thematic editions that address pressing issues in the industry, making our journal a valuable resource for researchers and professionals alike.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the editorial team, authors, and reviewers whose dedication and expertise have contributed to the growth and success of this journal.

I warmly invite scholars and industry experts to submit their research for consideration in future issues of the *International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism*.

**Sincerely,**

Professor Khalid Al Sulaiti  
Founder and Editor-in-Chief



## Big Data and Blockchain synergy in Digital Transformative Tourism Education

Mayssa Ahmed Ben Belgacem

[mayssa.ahmed@otc.edu.om](mailto:mayssa.ahmed@otc.edu.om)

Aaisha Sulaiman AL Shuaili

[aaisha.shuaili@otc.edu.om](mailto:aaisha.shuaili@otc.edu.om)

Oman Tourism College

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### Abstract

*Current tourism learning in higher education system often lacks a focus on the recent technologies necessary for tourism growth, competitiveness, and adaptability. Hence, the alignment of tourism transformative education with the changing needs of the practical tourism context is pivotal to prepare students to be responsible, informed and technologically qualified learners for a best future of the industry. This research highlights the crucial role of the transformative education and strives to bridge the gap in the existing tourism literature. Through meticulous analysis, this paper aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of tourism education and its interaction with the industry by evaluating and implementing a distinctive potential of big data and blockchain synergy.*

### Key Words:

Transformative Education, Tourism, Big Data, Blockchain.

### Introduction

In light of recent and emerging challenges such as climate change, violent and hateful ideologies, conflicts, and the potential hazards of global pandemics, education must teach young people the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required to live cooperatively, be flexible, think critically, respect diversity, care for the environment, and enthusiastically participate in finding solutions both locally and globally. Accordingly, Transformative Education is critical in assisting individuals to develop these competencies. (UNESCO, 2022)

Transformative Learning was first presented in 1978 by Jack Mezirow. It presents a wide-range approach to adult education that includes identity changes and considers numerous perspectives and experiences, (Mezirow, 2008). Transformative Education can also be defined as “an approach to teaching based on promoting change, where educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them”. (Eschenbacher, 2020)



Transitioning to digital transformative education, new digital technologies have rapidly transformed societal functions and have created a continuous need for the acquiring and mastering of new skills. The education sector has witnessed a series of paradigm shifts in its system of delivery influenced by technology. In the past two decades, distance education and e-learning have become an important means of delivering knowledge and skills in the education sector (Daniel, 1996, Altbach, 2005). This trend has filtered down to tertiary level education in travel and tourism, where there has been a significant push towards digital delivery of unit materials as a way to adequately prepare students for the digital workforce that awaits them.

As the tourism industry undergoes rapid transformation, the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as big data, blockchain, and emerging technologies presents new opportunities for revolutionizing tourism education (EU Commission, 2020). Integration these technologies enable tourism educators to analyse vast amounts of data, including travellers' preferences, booking patterns, and market trends, to inform curriculum development and strategic decision-making (Li et al., 2021).

This article explores the potential of these technologies to enhance experiential learning, foster global collaboration, and prepare students for the dynamic landscape of the tourism sector. This study is structured into four parts: the first part entails the potential opportunities of adopting Bigdata in both realms of learning analytics and tourism industry. The second part examine the role of Blockchain in creating a transparent and secure academic and industrial environment. The third part is dedicated to illuminate the authors' proposed scheme presenting the transformative potential of integrating big data and blockchain synergy. Then, the analysis of the combined impacts of these technologies paves the way for advanced solutions that fill the gap between education and industry. Finally, challenges and future directions are discussed to open the doors for further research.

### **Big Data in Transformative Education**

Applying big data in education using learning analytics plays a crucial role in measuring students' learning outcomes and implementing efficient teaching process. This can facilitate the determination of the best teaching strategies and contribute to track the level of students' engagement in the learning process.

The immense potential of big data in organising, interpreting, and analysing massive amount of data, will enable educational institutions to analyse students' learning behaviour and design a personalized learning experience and informed decision-making process (Dishon, 2017).

Table 1 illustrates Big Data learning analytics, highlighting their critical role in developing educational experience.

**Table 1: Big data learning analytics**

| Significance                             | Description   |
|--|---|
| Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM)       | Implementing Data-driven decision-making assist in improving teaching and students learning experience. As well as enhancing accountability and transparency and promoting innovation and collaboration in the educational institution. Moreover, DDDM help educators to evaluate students' behaviour and preferences and provide personalised instructions and feedback. (Estrellado, 2020)  |
| Data Privacy and Security                | Ethical considerations surrounding data privacy and security are crucial when implementing big data initiatives in education. Ensuring the protection of student data is essential for maintaining trust and compliance with legal regulations (Reidenberg, 1995).  |
| Integration of Analytics                 | The integration of predictive modelling and learning analytics into educational institutions can lead to more effective student support mechanisms and improved educational outcomes. This integration optimises resources and enhances decision-making processes (Baker, 2009).  |
| Personalised Learning                    | When compared with more technical subjects such as IT, students of tourism often have problems in seeing the direct benefits of computerised systems and the potential cost savings involved. Personalized learning opportunities give students the chance to practice and improve their weak points in knowledge. This is a direct improvement over traditional teaching through a fixed curriculum and is made possible through utilizing Intelligent Learning Environments (Cheung et al.2021) |
| Predictive Analytics for Student Success | Predictive analytics powered by big data can forecast student success and identify potential areas of concern. This proactive approach allows for early intervention strategies to be implemented, thereby supporting students in achieving their academic goals (Fahd and Miah, 2023).   |

## Big data in the transformative Tourism sector and Educational Empowerment

By incorporating big data in the tourism industry, it is expected to expand more efficiently and effectively in determining the future patterns of the industry. Big data can be gathered from private and public sources. The ability to gather and evaluate customer data and other forms of information has transformed tourism marketing and pricing strategies (Tong-On et al.2021). In fact, data in the travel industry is being used to better comprehend business and leisure travellers, develop customer service, offer the right pricing on the product, and more effectively promote and distribute their services. With the incremented availability of data, such technology will also enhance operational efficiency within tourism industry. This can be seen by utilizing data to find out patterns and make quick decisions (Naqvi et al.2021). Through carefully maintained business processes, data can help avoid making decisions out of habit or from emotional incentives. This makes the industry more methodical, and operators will be able to embrace well-informed changes that are beneficial to their company and clients.

The significance of big data analytics in tourism is exceedingly critical. It has numerous implications and could change the whole perspective of how the tourism industry works. Utilising big data tools can help tourism organisations to expand their productivity and enhance their offers to potential travellers, by analysing data from social platforms, commerce websites as well as review sites, to find out what travellers think about specific destinations and what can be developed. This is becoming increasingly important in the tourism industry where there

is an overabundance of data and where it is often difficult to determine the information that will provide the most valuable insight. This necessitate improving training and education requirements for the industry (Lim et al.2023)

The integration of big data in tourism education would create innumerable benefits for the students as well as the educators. In the case of students, it would create opportunities for engaging in real-life work environment (Fettes et al., 2020). Students will be able to engage in experiential learning, allowing them to apply what they are learning in the classroom to a real work environment. This can be achieved through the use of simulations and case studies using the big data sets from the business environment. Real-life examples can foster a greater understanding of concepts and data analysis that will stay with them throughout their career. Big data will create opportunities for more internships with tourism businesses (Ivkovic & McRae, 2021).

For educators, the use of big data in tourism education can help measure student learning and teacher effectiveness. This can be done using learning analytics to track how students are engaging in the learning process and determine what teaching strategies are effective. Big data sets can also be used to evaluate curriculum effectiveness through measuring the knowledge and skills gained by students as they progress through the program. This can ultimately lead to program improvement. The increase in data analysis skills required in the tourism industry can also create more research opportunities for educators in their respective fields. Table 2 presents the role of Big Data in tourism education.

**Table 2: Leveraging Big Data in Tourism for Enhanced Education**

| <b>Importance</b>                | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Education Awareness Benefits</b>   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Understanding Traveler Behaviour | Big data facilitates the analysis of massive dataset to identify travellers’ preferences, motivations and booking matters (Zhao et al.,2019).   | The incorporation of big data analytics in educational curriculums will result in raising students’ awareness on the critical role of data-driven decision making and the advanced industry practices (Manyika et al., 2011). |
| Enhancing Destination Management | Enabling destination managers to track tourists flows, evaluate carrying capacity and enhance resource allocation (Emmer and Holešinská 2020).  | Enhancing students’ comprehension about the critical role of sustainable tourism practices and responsible resources management in tourism industry.  |
| Facilitating Market Research     | Big data analytics allow to identify the emerging markets and recognising the business opportunity as well as designing creative and customised marketing campaigns to enhance tourists’ experiences in the industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). | Through the analysis of big data, students will be able to identify the recent market trends and create effective marketing strategies.   |



|                                   |  |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Enabling Personalised Experiences | Big data assist tourism organisations to personalise tourists' experiences through information gained from their preferences and interactions (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). | Students will recognise the importance of customer-centric approaches and will learn to personalise consumers' experiences based on their preferences. |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|

## Blockchain in Education

Blockchain is a decentralised, distributed ledger technology that securely records transactions across multiple computers in a tamper-resistant and transparent manner (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016). Each transaction, or block, is linked to the previous one, forming a chain of blocks, hence its named blockchain. This technology utilises cryptographic techniques to ensure the integrity and immutability of data, making it highly secure and resistant to unauthorised alterations. The technological evolution raised the need of digital educational development (Balcerzak et al., 2022). However, the physical presence remains a necessity presenting a restriction for learning advancement (Ghazali & Saleh, 2018; Daraghmi et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2018).

### Blockchain learning analytics.

Blockchain offers learning analytics advantages such as secure assessment and certification emerging a pivotal application of this transformative technology. Applying Blockchain within the education sector guarantee a secure credentialing and certification. Indeed, it facilitates the execution of tamper-proof as well as transparent certification systems. This will help these establishment to ensure the authenticity of academic achievements certifications stored on the blockchain ledger (Lam & Dongol, 2022).

This technology presents an essential tool addressing different challenges encountered by educational institutions such the case of Saudi Arabia, undertaking a rapid educational expansion based on the Saudi Vision 2030. Blockchain allows the verification of various obstacles encountered by both students and educators. This will assure safeguarding the education integrity and the rapid advancement of digital transformative education (Savelyeva & Park, 2022).

Similarly, the use of Blockchain within the Indian Higher Education context seeks to combat the propagation of counterfeit degrees by improving transparency and security across the education system (Grech & Camilleri, 2017). India Higher Education presents a successful case of applying blockchain-based ecosystems such as Secure Key Technologies. Higher Educational Institutions in this country strength authentication and identity validation processes, laying a solid basis for an efficient digital future (Grech & Camilleri, 2017; Savelyeva & Park, 2022).

### Incorporating Blockchain Technology in Assessment Methods

The growing difficulty in remote assessment, remarkably reached unprecedented levels of fraud and plagiarism during the Covid-19 outbreak. In order to combat plagiarism and e-cheating in remote assessments, the use of Blockchain technology, Digital Signature principles, and plagiarism detection tools successfully reduce or remove these difficulties by carefully analysing and classifying these elements. Eventually, the primary goal is to implement and encourage information security and reliability within the assessment system of distance

learning. By incorporating cutting-edge technologies and best practices, higher educational institutions strive to uphold academic integrity and ensure the credibility of remote assessments (Dias et al., 2023).

Furthermore, blockchain-based assessment platforms offer secure and transparent environments for conducting exams and assessments, ensuring the immutability of student performance data (Lam & Dongol, 2022).

### The Role of Blockchain in Transformative Tourism Education

Table 3 outlines the benefits of blockchain implementation and underscores the significance of fostering digital awareness within tourism education.

**Table 3: The Role of Blockchain in Transformative Tourism Education**

| Role                                   | Description   |
|--|---|
| Enhancing Transparency & Trust         | The exploitation of Blockchain technology in tourism education will assist students to generate advanced solutions for enhancing transparency and accountability in the industry. This may involve process like validating supply chain integrity and certifying travel documents. (Van et al., 2023).  |
| Exploring Decentralized Applications   | Through decentralised applications, students and teachers can collaborate and interact directly and smoothly by relying on innovative approaches to deliver the content of their tourism study. Exposing student to this technology will motivate them to understand its potential in reforming the business models and tourists' experiences (Ozdemir and Erol, 2020). |
| Promoting Innovation and Collaboration | Blockchain technology fosters the concepts of innovation and collaboration by allowing stakeholders to share data securely and transparently. Hence, students need to be encouraged to participate in blockchain and industry research projects to strengthen the industrial partnership (Ivanov and Webster, 2024).  |
| Facilitating sustainable Tourism       | Educators can reinforce students' knowledge on how blockchains are promoting sustainable tourism practices and responsible consumption and production. (Park and Kim, 2023).  |
| Enabling Financial Inclusion           | Tourism industry can financially benefit from blockchain technology through presenting secure and low-cost payment systems. Therefore, teachers can discuss with students the critical role of blockchain in facilitating access to financial services and its role in empowering communities in tourism industry (Zheng and Law, 2022).                                |
| Decentralized Identity Verification    | Decentralised Blockchain system offers secure techniques to verify travellers' identities and decreasing the dependence on centralised agencies. Hence, educators should encourage students to learn about blockchain-based identity solutions to create a secure tourism experience (Zheng and Li, 2023).  |
| Transparent Supply Chain Management    | Blockchain provides another advantage of enabling transparent supply chain management. Educators can engage students in comprehending the pivotal role of blockchain in encouraging supply chain transparency in the tourism field, while encouraging reliable sourcing and sustainable practices. (Ivanov and Webster, 2020).  |
| Facilitating Smart Contracts           | Smart contracts are usually used to automate the implementation of an agreement so that all participants can be instantly certain of the outcome, without involving any intermediaries or time loss. these are written contracts which will be converted  |

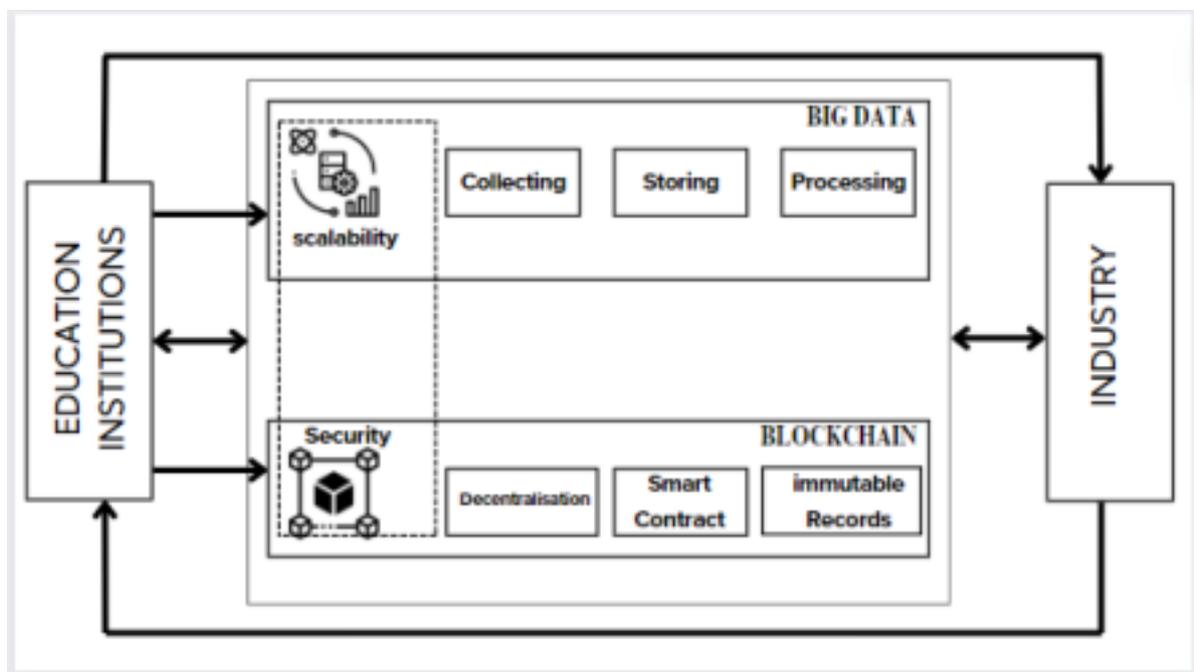
into lines of code. Smart contracts in the tourism industry can revolutionise the need for contracting services. It helps to connect travellers directly with the service providers through smart contracts (Luo and Hu, 2023).

### Big data and Blockchain synergy

The marriage of Blockchain and Big Data illustrates a perfect union of innovation within the digital transformative education. This dynamic partnership offers a new era of data-driven learning transformation.

The below scheme (Figure. 1) illustrates the role of Big Data and Blockchain synergy in bridging the gap between academia and the industry.

**Figure. 1: Big Data & Blockchain Synergy**



*Source: Authors*

This scheme isn't only a theoretical construct. It demonstrates a blueprint for enhancing tangible, transformative change within the educational environment. This will create a better future involving effective cooperation, innovation, and progress. The approach combines systematic steps of Big Data as well as Blockchain decentralised system.

Through a series of efficient phases, Big Data enables educational institutions gain actionable insights, update teaching strategies, and improve students' experiences. The collection of data can be gathered from private datasets including learning outcomes, students' performance, and administrative processes. As well as publicly available datasets from various sources such as social media, online reviews, and booking platforms.

However, the characteristic of unstructured nature of big data including an enormous amount of valuable information remains unprocessed. This information could be utilised to

enhance the predictive capabilities of data analytics, and aid in better decision-making within the education sector. However, this is a challenging feat as unearthing this information requires sifting through a vast volume of data, and this requires storage and computation of such big data. Yet, current data analytics platforms implemented within educational institutions may run into scalability issues, given the volume of data involved, and this is where there is a potential for big data analytics on Blockchain. Moreover, within the tourism industry, big data analytics in the realms of fraud detection, consumer behaviour prediction, revenue management, etc. could benefit from a more cost-efficient analytics platform in the form of blockchain.

The interaction between educational institutions and industry can lead to generate numerous benefits and opportunities not only through implementing Big Data Technology but also Blockchain which plays a primordial role across decentralisation, smart contract, and Immutable Records. In fact, the decentralisation system can ensure the authenticity of academic achievements and manage the process of validating credentials for students by verifying academic records and certifications. In turns, employers can easily and securely streamline the recruitment process.

## **Challenges and Future Directions**

### **Data Privacy and Security Concerns in Educational Innovation**

Big data and Blockchain technologies pose a critical challenge of Privacy and Security Concerns (Kerzner et al., 2023). To address such restriction, educators should ensure the implementation of a transparent system ensuring secure data processing practices mitigating the risk of algorithmic bias (Koh et al., 2022).

On one hand, educational data privacy is often relatively under addressed when compared with other domains such as health or business where there are strict regulations on what data can be collected and how it can be used (Reidenberg, J.R. 1995). However, due to the sensitive nature of the student data and changing laws reforms new tools and methods are needed to ensure that educational data can be utilized in manners that preserve student privacy and adhere to emerging regulations. Therefore, the best practices methods for secure data storage and analysis are still in development.

Particularly, the extended database and analysis within the tourism education domain is related to various kind of risks associated to the collection, storage, and usage of personal data like students' academic records and learning behaviours. This is why it must fulfil data protection regulations like GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) (Park et al., 2023). Moreover, the implementation of clear policies and the Compliance with regulatory frameworks governing data privacy and security is primordial to protect individuals' privacy rights and to mitigate legal risks associated with data processing and storage (Al-Kasasbeh et al., 2021; Faiella et al., 2022).

These challenges may also be addressed by the implementation of a strategic investment in education technology infrastructure, standardized protocols, scalable architectures to encourage learning outcomes and gutting students ready for the dynamic tourism industry (Guo et al., 2022).

Despite of the existence of several blockchain-based initiatives focusing on data integrity and Secure Record Keeping in education (Mitra, Tauz, & Dolecek, 2022; Kan & Kim, 2019; Zhu, Guo, & Zhang, 2021; Guesmi & Farah, 2021), challenges remain in selecting the

appropriate blockchain technology and addressing storage complexities (Xu et al., 2017; Alawida, Samsudin, & Teh, 2019).

Additionally, the integration of blockchain technology into education requires careful consideration to ensure privacy, security, and scalability (Alawida et al., 2019; Farah & Belghith, 2017).

### **Embracing Continuous Professional Development for Educators**

The issue of time has been cited as another factor that inhibits the ability of educators to seek continuous, professional development (CPD). Full-time educators may face a lack of relevant CPD opportunities due to the highly specific nature of their subject. This is a point which could apply to several teaching disciplines.

Due to the demands of teaching innovation and change, CPD remains a significant factor in the success of any educational course. In the field of tourism, it is widely regarded that educators delivering and teaching elements of the product to students must have an up-to-date knowledge and industry experience of their subject. However, this need is often cited as a point of weakness as many educators with valuable industry experience are often part-time or adjunct staff and may not have regular access to CPD opportunities.

### **Enhancing Collaboration for effective implementation**

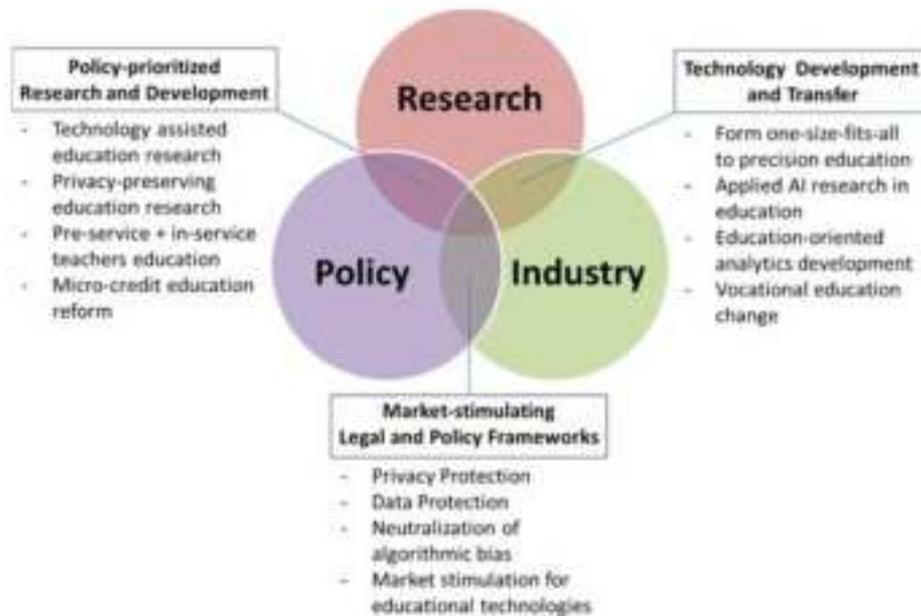
Data scientists, often employed for their expert analysis and interpretation of large data sets, are the leading force behind the big data phenomenon. Their skills and knowledge will be in high demand according to the potential benefits of big data in education. It is essential that education systems and institutions have a strong collaboration between data scientists or professionals, educators policy-makers, and researchers.

Such collaboration is necessary in the development and improvement of assessment and learning analytics tools. Data scientists must consult with educators to identify the needs of educational tools. This will ensure that tools are properly aligned with learning objectives and subject content. Together they must develop the competences and key abilities that students will need for the future workforce (Bereiter, 2002). Educators have a more focused understanding of educational theory and practice and can provide insight to data scientists on the educational context in which tools and data analysis will be applied. It will also be necessary for data scientists to train educators in the use of new tools and data analysis for the purpose of empowering educators to interpret data and ultimately use it toward the improvement of their own teaching and student learning. (Luan et al., 2020).

This collaboration will result in continual improvement and refinement of data analysis, providing more meaningful results and feedback to educators for the betterment of student learning. However, such collaboration may take a lot of work to interconnect across different disciplines and industries. Particularly, when none of the parties have a clear idea of their mutually beneficial interests or the expertise and abilities to make that vision a reality.

Figure 2 shows the latest accomplishments and changing future trends resulting from the use of big data and artificial intelligence (AI) in education, at the intersections of researchers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders.

**Figure 2: Contemporary developments and future trends at the intersections between research, policy, and industry driven by big data and AI advances in education.**



*Source: Luan et al., (2020)*

## Conclusion

Today, technology has advanced from just facilitating and managing educational systems to becoming the foundation of creating different ways of learning. As technology rapidly grows, digital education is a continuous process that aims to provide the best learning experience among its learners where this enables them to gain knowledge anywhere and anytime. During this process, digital technology offers continuous interaction between learners and their environment, creating more meaningful educational process that result in new knowledge transfer, and changes in learners' behaviour. Through meticulous analysis, this paper aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of tourism education and its interaction with the industry by evaluating and implementing a distinctive potential of big data and blockchain synergy. Using Big Data and Blockchain technologies ensure data-driven insights, transparency and security integrity serves to improve and update curriculum design for better academic and practical future. This will create an educational vision based on flexibility, reactivity, and alignment with continuous change of the digital era, particularly in the tourism sector, creating an environment where advancement, cooperation, and creativity coexist peacefully.



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## Regenerative Hospitality: The Case of Rural Lebanon

Alessandro Inversini

[alessandro.inversini@ehl.ch](mailto:alessandro.inversini@ehl.ch)

EHL Hospitality Business School, HES-SO, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Switzerland.

Salma N. Talhouk

[ntsalma@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ntsalma@aub.edu.lb)

American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Alain Daou

[ad73@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ad73@aub.edu.lb)

American University of Beirut – Mediterraneo, Faculty of Business

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### Abstract

*Regenerative hospitality sees accommodations as interventions that make the capacities of places, communities and their guests grow; regenerative leaders abandoned a mechanistic vision of the reality to focus on a living systems ecological worldview; regenerative businesses foster net-positive impact on natural and social ecosystems, and they foster transformative experience creation. This research presents the preliminary results of a regenerative hospitality study in two Lebanese Biosphere Reserves triangulating descriptive survey, social networking analysis and semi-structured interviews. Results show the characteristics of Lebanese regenerative hospitality and shed lights on the importance of the regenerative mind shift, the guest perception of authenticity in regenerative hospitality and the key characteristic of Lebanese regenerative hospitality landscape.*

### Key Words

Regenerative Hospitality, Net-Positive, Place Intelligence, People Intelligence, Regenerative Mindshift, Lebanon.

### Introduction

The discourse on sustainability in the hospitality industry has evolved beyond merely mitigating impacts to encompass a more ambitious aim: achieving regenerative goals toward a net positive impact on society and the environment with a clear impact on the host-guest relationship (Inversini et al., 2023). In fact, initially, sustainability was perceived as a desirable add-on, but it has now become a non-negotiable starting point for the industry. However, the concept of sustainability alone is no longer sufficient in the face of escalating ecological and social challenges. This has led to the emergence of the net positive (Polman & Winston, 2022) and regenerative approaches (Bellato & Cheer, 2021), which go beyond sustainability by aiming to leave the planet and its inhabitants in a better state than before.

Net positive, as defined by Polman and Winston (2022), occurs when a business's positive impacts outweigh its negative ones. This involves shrinking the ecological footprint while simultaneously increasing the social and environmental handprints of a business. The shift towards a net positive approach requires hospitality businesses to move beyond mere sustainability credentials and focus on

the scale and ambition of their restorative and regenerative practices. The peculiarity of hospitality is that this ecosystem approach can have an impact also on the relationships between host and guest, with a special focus on transformative experience creation (Inversini et al., 2023).

Corporate responsibility, a key component of the sustainability paradigm, has evolved over decades through concepts such as the Triple Bottom Line, Corporate Social Responsibility, Creating Shared Value, and Environmental, Social, and Governance approaches (e.g. Legrand et al., 2022). The regenerative approach represents the latest stage in this evolution, aiming not only to minimize harm but to actively contribute to the betterment of society and the environment. It is here important to note that the regenerative approach is not a ‘new sustainability standard’: on the contrary it is a responsible business orientation deeply rooted into the sustainability literature and practices (Inversini, 2023).

## Review of The Literature

There is an increasing fatigue towards the adoption of sustainability standards: this is because current standards and methodologies are struggling to solve the growing negative impacts of human and business activities on society and environment (Hahn & Tampe, 2021). In the hospitality field, the adoption of corporate sustainability practices has proven to be even more difficult due to the fragmented nature of the industry (with independent small players) and the actual scope and horizon of current sustainability practices (e.g. Legrand et al., 2022). Small hotel owners are in fact struggling with the sustainability standards and reports as they could find little value in those tools which have been designed for larger corporations (Derchi and Inversini, 2021).

Thus, there is a widespread call for new approaches and methodologies to support the everchanging competitive needs of hospitality businesses in conjunction with the concept of sustainability and more broadly with responsibility (Inversini et al., 2023). These should be designed for the size and scope of hospitality SMEs: most of the time hospitality businesses are deeply engaging both the natural and social ecosystems around them and - of course - with their customers in a deep and meaningful way. Therefore, sustainability and responsibility approaches for hospitality should be in line with preservation and, hopefully, regeneration of natural environment and community fabric around the hospitality businesses (Bellato & Cheer, 2021) and cater for relevant and possibly transformative experiences for customers (i.e. the relational ecosystem within the hotel). In other words, there is the need for a bottom-up approach to sustainability and responsibility that bypasses meaningless standardization and compartmentalized interventions (Reed, 2007) designed for large corporations which struggle to make sense for independent hospitality businesses.

The regenerative approach is a systemic approach has been rising to prominence in recent years (Hahn & Tampe, 2021) and stems from an ecological and living systems worldview where the goal is to promote the conditions for all life to renew and restore (Reed, 2007) fostering a net-positive mentality towards the destination (Hahn & Tampe, 2021). In contrast to sustainability, the regenerative approach can be considered as going beyond the commercial logic (Hahn & Tampe, 2021) towards actively serving the ecosystems around the hospitality business. Regenerative development paradigm in wider travel sector promotes innovations by embedding tourism practices within local communities and ecological processes that elevate human and non-human wellbeing (Bellato & Cheer, 2021). Tourism can be in fact reshaped in a more sustainable, inclusive, and caring model (Cheer, 2020). In essence, to move from sustainability to the regenerative approach, there is a need to shift from net zero impact (or “doing less bad”) to net positive impact (“doing more good”)- Polman & Winston, 2022), enabling the well-being of all stakeholders and ecosystems.

The current literature mostly tackles the regenerative approach in the tourism industry, and more specifically with a systemic (Bellato et al., 2022) and destination angle (e.g. Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022). Regenerative tourism is here seen as a virtuous practice able to encourage systemic impact on nature and communities fostering land and cultural reappropriation promoting indigenous knowledge;

at destination angle, regenerative tourism is therefore described as local bottom-up process focused on social ownership and decolonization (Bellato et al., 2023).

The regenerative hospitality approach starts from these premises but has a different scope. Regenerative hospitality can be in fact defined as a sustainable development paradigm where businesses are positioned as interventions that make the capacities of places, communities and their guests grow (Inversini et al., 2023; Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022). Regenerative hospitality is a responsible business orientation (Inversini, 2023) that looks at hotels as changemakers at the destination level: hoteliers are the building block of destinations and – in most cases – they are already contributing to destination challenges and ecosystem development (Inversini et al., 2023).

Regenerative hospitality is designed around two main concepts:

- ‘place intelligence’ that is the outer hospitality layer with the natural and social ecosystem (Inversini et al., 2023); in these layers hotels engage a with net-positive orientation both towards natural ecosystem (i.e. regenerative farming and agriculture etc. ) and towards the social fabric ecosystem (i.e. inclusivity, marginalized support etc.).
- the ‘people intelligence’ that is the inner hospitality layer with the relational and experiential ecosystems (Inversini et al., 2023). The net-positive orientation towards the place has an impact also in the inner layer that is the one promoting host-guest relationships with the co-creation of authentic – and often transformative – experiences involving both the nature and the community.

Central to the development of regenerative hospitality is what can be called the ‘regenerative mindshift’: this can be described as a shift of mind to implement regenerative approaches abandoning the current mechanistic vision to focus on an ecological worldview and to incorporate the living systems principles in a holistic way (Dredge, 2022).

## Methodology

Moving from the literature above, this paper aims at understanding the peculiarities of regenerative hospitality businesses in rural Lebanon; specifically, it focuses on two biosphere reserves: Al Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve and Jabal Moussa Natural Reserve. Thanks to a case study approach (Yin, 2009) and based on the triangulation of three different data points, this research has been designed to generate an initial understanding of:

- [Objective 1] the net-positive contribution to place intelligence and people intelligence aspects in regenerative hospitality in rural Lebanon;
- [Objective 2] travelers’ perception of regeneration in rural Lebanon;
- [Objective 3] the peculiarities of the regenerative hospitality businesses in rural Lebanon.

In order to tackle these objectives, and in collaboration with the office of tourism and nature preservation of the two biosphere reserves, three complimentary methods have been used:

The quantitative survey was submitted to service providers in the selected areas by partner organizations. A total of 47 valid answers were collected. Although not statically relevant, this survey showed a lack of engagement with sustainability certifications, but a positive mindset of the wider hospitality sector towards regenerative practices (i.e. an interest in natural and social ecosystems). The survey has been analyzed only in a descriptive manner to shed lights on (i) place intelligence, (ii) people intelligence and (iii) regenerative mindset.

The desk research analyzed the reviews of all accommodations and restaurants in the selected areas. A total of 5,121 reviews were analyzed from Tripadvisor.com and Airbnb.com. Data went through lemmatization and co-occurrences were then analyzed and clustered (Inversini et al., 2020). Place intelligence and people intelligence were as key for interpretation of the clusters.

The qualitative fieldwork occurred from June 12 to June 16, 2023, in the two selected areas. Representatives from nineteen organizations operating in the accommodation and the food and beverage fields were interviewed. The sample featured accommodations and restaurants in the two biosphere reserves and was created thanks to the snowball technique. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed with an inductive coding strategy and revealed the characteristics of the Lebanese rural and regenerative hospitality businesses.

## Results

### Net Positive Contribution

The exploratory survey obtained 47 valid answers. 35 questionnaires were filled in English, 10 in Arabic and 2 in French. Most of the respondents belong to the guesthouse segment (n=29) and are located in a mountain area (n=36). Respondents showed a net positive attitude towards the nature and the community net positive contribution (i.e. place intelligence) and a strong tie with net-positive attitude towards visitors (i.e. people intelligence). Although in their self-assessment, most of the businesses said to engage in sustainability practices (n= 30), very few of them are involved in actual certifications.

By computing the average of the survey items related to (i) place intelligence and (ii) people intelligence and plotting them against the average of the survey items of (iii) regenerative mindset, it is possible to compare the results by reserve.

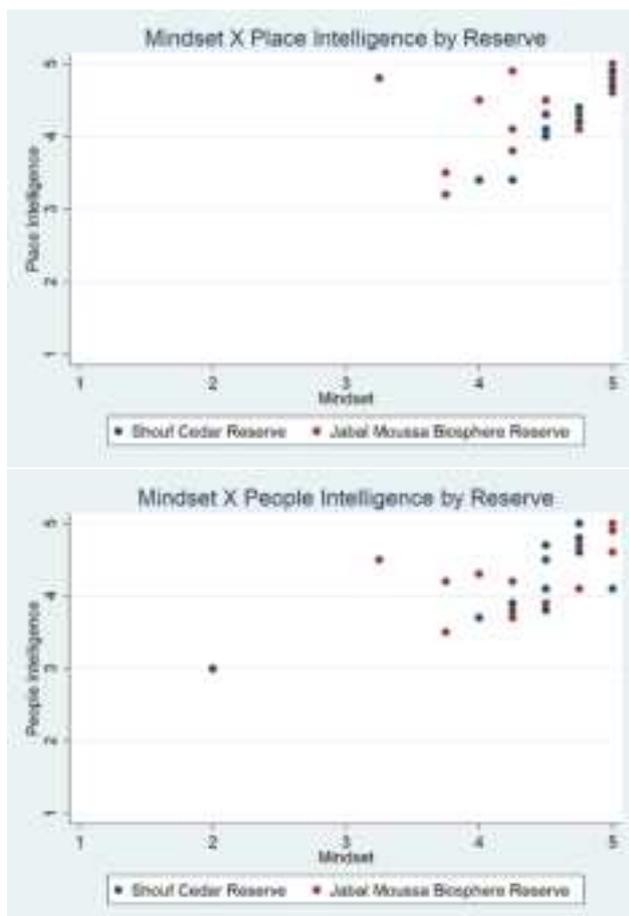


Figure 1.1 Mindset & Place Intelligence by Reserve | Figure 1.2 Mindset & People Intelligence by Reserve

## Travelers Perception

Results showed that hospitality and restaurant establishments in the areas are leveraging heritage, culture and nature. Traditions in terms of food and excursions are dominating the scene on social media. There was general positivity in the reviews with no criticality highlighted.

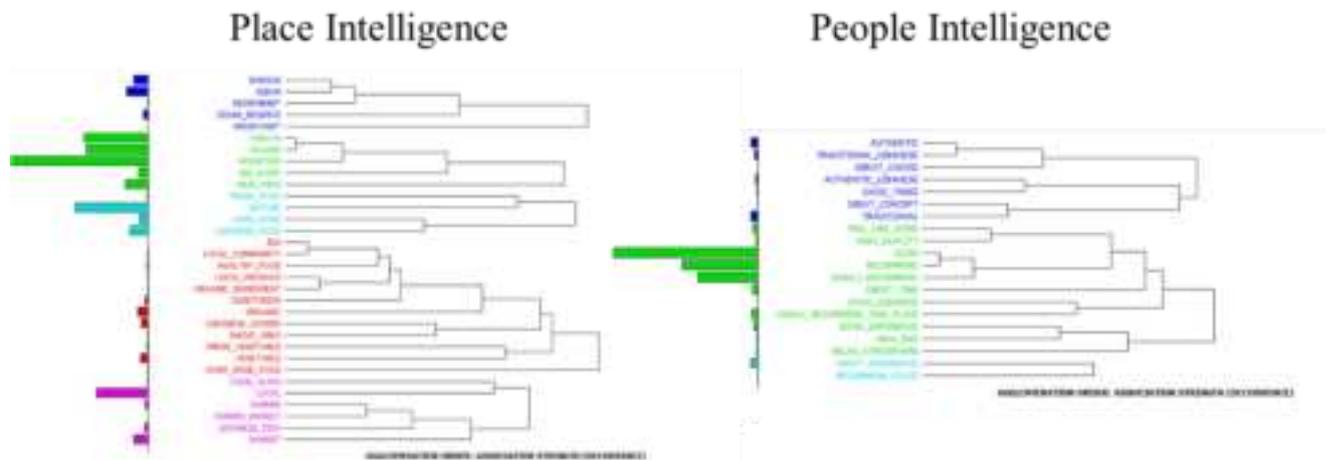


Figure 2.1 Place Intelligence Co-Occurrences Clusters | Figure 2.2 People Intelligence Co-Occurrence Clusters

### Place intelligence

In the case of the outer dimension (i.e., nature and community – Figure 2.1), five clusters are formed. The blue cluster groups phrases related to both reserves. The Shouf Cedar Reserve with phrases such as *Cedar Reserve* and *Jabal Moussa Reserve* by mentioning places close by or activities in the area (e.g., *Faraya* and *ski slope*). Other clusters reference nature (i.e., light blue cluster) with phrases such as *bio*, *organic ingredient*, and *home made food*; and community (i.e., red cluster) with phrases such as *cook class*, *farmer market*, and *Lebanese dish*.

### People intelligence

When only considering the inner dimension (i.e., guest experience – Figure 2.1), three clear clusters are formed. The blue cluster represents Lebanese tradition with phrases such as *authentic* and *traditional Lebanese*. The green cluster represents the positive experience of guests with terms such as *feel like home* and *highly recommend*.

## Regenerative Hospitality in Rural Lebanon

Interviews were analyzed in an inductive way to shed light on the main characteristics of Regenerative Hospitality in rural Lebanon. Four codes families have emerged from the analysis:

- **Blending with Nature:** in the two natural reserves visited, there was a clear attachment from the hospitality managers towards nature. Nature was the single most mentioned topic in the interviews. This bond was clear and strong and was also radiated in the actual experiences provided by the interviewees.
- **Inclusivity at the Core:** a very strong bond with the local socio-cultural landscape was observed. The managers were in most of the cases active members of the local community who seek to foster inclusivity (for disabled and/or marginalized people) and to support people's development and professional growth by encouraging them to be part of their entrepreneurial journey.
- **Long Lasting Relationships:** networks and relationships were noticed to be at the core of the Lebanese regenerative hospitality. Clusters of people interested in common challenges (i.e.

nature or community issues) are naturally emerging in a bottom–up manner which also fosters the sharing of good practices among the industry.

- Blossoming Experiences: the above points resulted in newly created and crafted experiences which leverage both the community and nature. This approach to human and non-human ecosystems is de facto fostering creativity in new businesses that wish to maintain a meaningful relationship with the natural environment and to support community regeneration.

## Discussions and Conclusions

This contribution presents the preliminary results of a case study on regenerative (Reed, 2007) hospitality in rural Lebanon with a focus on (i) Shouf Cedar Reserve and (ii) Jabal Moussa Reserve. Thanks to a data triangulation (descriptive survey, social networking analysis and semi-structured interviews) this research highlights:

- the correlation between regenerative mindset and (i) place intelligence and (ii) people intelligence in the studied case (Objective 1). The analyzed properties (Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2) show the majority of respondents having a correlation between the construct ‘mindset’ and ‘place intelligence’ and ‘people intelligence’.
- the customers’ perception extracted from online reviews, shows an understanding of the natural and social connection in the accommodations and restaurants analyzed and highlights the concepts of authenticity of the experiences proposed (Objective 2).
- the inner characteristics of regenerative hospitality in rural Lebanon are essentially base on four interconnected pillars which are: (i) nature, (ii) community – exemplifying the place intelligence and (iii) relationships and (iv) meaningful experiences – exemplifying the people intelligence.

This paper presents the first attempt to investigate the mindset, the place intelligence, and the people intelligence (Inversini et al., 2023) in the context of regenerative hospitality; Lebanese rural hospitality can be seen as a case study of regenerative economy, fostering a net-positive impact on inner and outer thanks to a regenerative mind shift. Future research will delve into the regenerative hospitality issue moving from the dimensions here presented (Inversini et al., 2023) minimizing the limitations of the current research which can be summarized in (i) case study approach with low generalization possibility, (ii) limited sample size for the quantitative investigation and (iii) not clearly defined borders for the social media analysis.

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# Paradise for Everyone? Exploring HR Solutions for Local and Expatriate Workers in Isolated Environment Through a Case Study of the Maldives.

Kristina Nikishova

[kristina.nikishova@lesroches.com](mailto:kristina.nikishova@lesroches.com)

Rachel Germanier

[rachel.germanier@lesroches.edu](mailto:rachel.germanier@lesroches.edu)

Les Roches Global Hospitality Management, Switzerland

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates employee well-being and Human Resources (HR) strategies in luxury Maldivian resorts to determine how the current HR practices meet the needs of expatriate and local workers in this remote area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine local and expatriate employees and an HR manager revealing challenges such as loneliness and adaptation to new cultural norms. While employees cope through technology and HR-provided psychological support, restrictions on facilities and a lack of activities for women remain concerns. HR initiatives, including training programs and salary benefits aim to promote work-life balance and satisfaction. The study highlights the complex interaction between isolation, organizational policies, and individual experiences in the luxury resort industry, offering insights for HR professionals and policymakers aiming to improve employee well-being in isolated workplaces.*

## Key Words:

Luxury resort, Employee wellbeing, Isolated workplace, Human Resources Practices

## Introduction

While the Maldives presents itself as a paradisaical holiday destination with its bungalows atop sapphire seas and immaculate beaches, previous research exposes an uglier side for the workers who maintain this remote haven in the form of employment law breaches and poor employee well-being. The literature has yet to explore how HR departments perceive and address the needs of their employees in this context. This study aims to fill that gap by comparing the lived experiences of employees in luxury Maldivian resorts with current HR practices. Thematically analyzed interview data provided valuable insights into HR strategies including psychological support to alleviate loneliness and training and salary benefits to act as external motivational factors to compensate to some extent for the remoteness of the working environment. An unexpected finding was that HR strategies need to recognize the role played by gender in employee well-being in remote areas like the Maldives. Further similar research into under-studied isolated areas where luxury tourism is booming could include locations such as jungles, mountains and savannahs to determine to what extent the findings from this study are transferable to other remote contexts.

## Literature review

### Employee perspective

#### *Employee well-being in luxury establishments*

The workplace environment is a crucial factor for job seekers (Hassan, 2022). Current studies highlight the impact of psychological well-being on economic outcomes, addressing challenges such as excessive workloads, long hours, and limited career opportunities faced by frontline employees (Lee & Moreo, 2007; McNamara et al., 2011). Migrant workers encounter additional issues including low pay, discrimination, and substandard living conditions (McDowell et al., 2007; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). Seasonality exacerbates those difficulties, making matters such as leave entitlements during peak seasons more complicated (Del Bono & Weber, 2008). Nevertheless, a good level of training in luxury hotels assists employees achieve their career goals as they are eager to stay within the company (Karatepe, 2013). Still, there are gaps in understanding employee well-being, especially in remote environments like islands where workers are significantly impacted by stress and isolation (Douglas et al., 2018). In popular tourist destinations like the Maldives, employment regulations prioritize local hiring, yet expatriate workers remain integral to organizational success, and face issues ranging from inadequate living conditions to limited medical services (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shakeela et al., 2011). This underscores the need for enhanced Human Resources Management (HRM) practices and a more comprehensive understanding of employee well-being within luxury establishments, particularly in areas characterized by remoteness and seasonal fluctuations.

### ***Employee well-being on islands***

Several studies (see Baum, 2012; Mullings et al., 2021; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018) highlight the unique challenges faced by employees in remote areas, such as expatriate workers adjusting to a new lifestyle without urban conveniences (Mullings et al., 2021). This adaptation process can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, ultimately affecting job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Furthermore, working in isolated areas can be detrimental to physical and mental health with increased stress among foreign workers (Mullings et al., 2021). Support from family is considered as a crucial mitigating factor for stress and mental well-being in isolated workplaces (Golden et al., 2018). While difficulties such as burn-out and lack of work-life balance are widespread, it has been found that some employees find comfort in the slower pace of life and lower cost of living associated with remote environments (Wieland et al., 2021).

### ***Employee well-being in the Maldives***

A closer look at employee well-being in the Maldives reveals the complex environment shaped by both regional laws and business norms. Workers in the hospitality industry face various challenges, such as inadequate living conditions and imposition of restricted leave policies during peak season, due to their reliance on expatriate labor (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shakeela et al., 2011). Employment regulations mandating a minimum percentage of local hires aim to foster sustainable development, yet migrant workers remain essential to organizational performance (Najeeb, 2011; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). The practice of assigning a whole island to one resort contributes to the feeling of isolation of employees by restricting their access to basic services and intensifying their sense of solitude (Shakeela et al., 2011). The industry's seasonal nature and limitations of the resort model present further barriers to worker well-being, such as a reduction of meaningful leave benefits and challenges in obtaining legal protections (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). Despite these obstacles, many expatriate employees are driven by the excitement of travel and professional prospects, indicating a complex environment where financial incentives and concerns for one's own well-being overlap (Baum, 2012). Nonetheless, the body of research highlights the necessity of paying more attention to workers' well-being in the Maldives, as the country's present procedures fall short of meeting the needs of a diverse migratory labor force.

### **HR practices to support workers in isolated workplaces**

HR and employees tend to have diverse needs and interests (Najeeb and Barrett, 2019), however, the role of HR is to develop a positive workplace environment and mitigate negative outcomes in the favor of workers (Wong et al., 2019). When HR anticipates employees' needs, both local and expatriate workers exhibit a lower stress level as the resources and organizational demands are balanced (Torvisco et al., 2022). Indeed, the HR department is expected to serve as a bridge in the gap between the management and employees by guiding, supporting and helping workers (Najeeb, 2016). As the role of HR is to propose solutions to business problems (Najeeb, 2016), they should be aware of the workers' needs and issues related to employees' well-being at the workplace, which provides credence to the

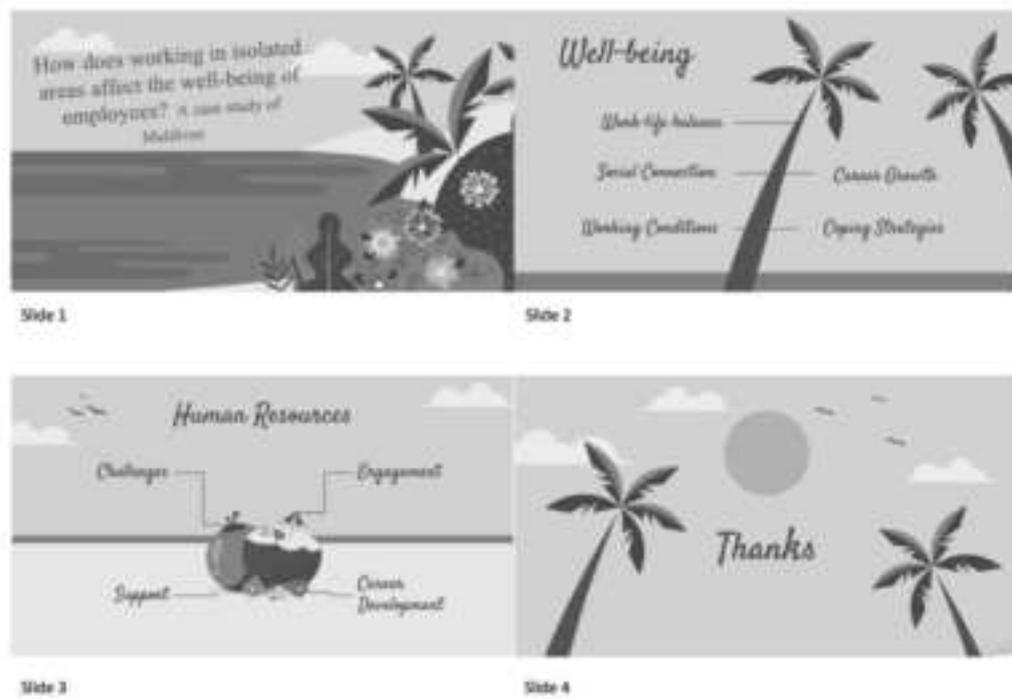
research question this work set out to answer: To what extent do the current HRM practices meet the needs of both expatriate and local workers? A case study of the Maldives.

### Methodology

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative, interpretive research approach was used in the form of a revelatory case study which provided insight into a previously unexplored phenomenon (Yin, 2009), involving the Maldives as the selected region of research (Veal, 2018).

The themes covered in the 45-minute to two-hour long interviews were derived from the literature: work-life balance, social connection, working conditions, career growth and coping strategies and were phrased as open-ended questions, such as, “How has working in an isolated area affected your ability to maintain a work-life balance?” in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the individuals’ perspectives (Friborg & Rosenvinge, 2013). An informal tone was maintained throughout the interview and text supplemented with was shown on the screen to guide the interviewee, see figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. Images shown during the interview**



The participants, four Maldivians, five expatriate workers and one HR manager, were selected purposefully to provide insights into the specific situation rather than randomly for reasons of representativity and generalization as would be required in quantitative work (Schoch, 2019). To guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms were used for participants, see Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Interviewees' demographics**

| Pseudonyms | Department      | Position    | Gender | Age | Nationality | Previous resort working experience |
|------------|-----------------|-------------|--------|-----|-------------|------------------------------------|
| E1         | Food & Beverage | Hostess     | Female | 31  | Ukrainian   | 3                                  |
| E2         | Spa             | Spa manager | Female | 42  | Filipino    | 7                                  |
| E3         | Sales           | Manager     | Female | 38  | Russian     | 2                                  |

|     |                    |  |        |    |                                 |   |
|-----|--------------------|--|--------|----|---------------------------------|---|
| E4  | Front Office       | Duty manager                           | Female | 27 | Swiss /<br>French /<br>American | 5 |
| E5  | Front Office       | GEM (Guest<br>Experience Maker)        | Male   | 26 | Kazakh                          | 2 |
| L1  | Front Office       | Duty manager                           | Male   | 28 | Maldivian                       | 4 |
| L2  | Front Office       | Bell supervisor                        | Male   | 26 | Maldivian                       | 3 |
| L3  | Housekeeping       | Executive<br>housekeeper               | Male   | 36 | Maldivian                       | 6 |
| L4  | Front Office       | GEM (Guest<br>Experience Maker)        | Male   | 28 | Maldivian                       | 7 |
| HR1 | Human<br>Resources | Learning and<br>development<br>manager | Male   | 42 | French                          | 1 |

To assure internal validity, a pilot interview was conducted before the data collection process which led to adding more questions to the interview schedule. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As is typical in exploratory case study research, this study has restricted external validity and there is no aim to generalize the findings (Clark et al., 2021; de Saint-Georges, 2018) rather, it gives voice to otherwise unheard locals and expatriates working in a particular remote luxury environment. This is in contrast to most social research which involves participants who are usually white, educated, and from industrialized, rich and democratic countries (Henrich et al., 2010).

### ***Limitations of the approach taken***

The constraints of this study include the online nature of conducting interviews and the resulting lack of face-to-face interactions, particularly for those respondents who did not know the interviewer well. It is hoped that the findings of this study will have transferability rather than generalizability and will act as “working hypotheses” for future work in remote areas as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Eisenhart (2009) describe. Data from the HR perspective is limited to that provided by the sole HR employee participant but this is not uncommon in case study research. The insider positioning of the interviewer, with her professional experience of working in the Maldives, provided a layer of knowledge (Teusner, 2016) and ease of access (Mercer, 2007) possibly not available to outsiders, however, this same positioning could potentially lead to interview bias (Mercer, 2007) which was at the forefront of her mind during data collection. Finally, the interviewer was attentive to and guarded against the potential for this insider positioning to lead to subjectivity in the data analysis (Chowdhury, 2014).

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Geographical isolation**

One of the main themes expressed by the employees was the impact of geographical isolation on their well-being and work-life balance although perceptions differed between the locals and expatriates. Local participants acknowledged the remoteness of the Maldives, but this did not seem troublesome as L1 noted: “You are in the middle of our Earth ... surrounded by the sea,” while L2 mentioned, “[we are] living far from the civilization” and always staying on the island. None of the local respondents felt the isolation was problematic, indeed, L3 stated categorically, “I never feel loneliness,” and for many it was advancements in communication technology which alleviated this feeling. Interviewees were in touch with their families through “phone calls” and “social media” as “Internet is provided on the island for the team members as well without any additional charge” (L1). Expatriate participants on the other hand viewed isolation more negatively, describing the challenge of being away from home and loved ones, having limited access to ordinary amenities, and experiencing difficulty adapting to a different way of

life. These findings are congruent with Golden et al. (2018), Ozcelilik and Barsade (2018) and Wieland et al. (2021), who mentioned that the main challenge associated with isolation is adaptation to a new lifestyle. Shared accommodation was a challenge faced by line staff with participants mentioning that they have to share rooms for four or six people and cultural differences complicating living standards. Expatriate workers noted it was difficult to rest in accommodation as not all roommates respect the personal space of others. The management-level staff stated they have better living conditions and more private space than their line staff colleagues supporting the finding of Najeeb (2011). Expatriate employees expressed more concerns about facilities than their local counterparts, suggesting a need for further improvements corresponding to the findings of Douglas et al. (2018). Finally, female participant E3 noted that there were few activities women could join in with indicating that well-being might be considered to be a gendered issue.

To mitigate the negative impacts of isolation, HR1 prepares “a lot of activities” such as “going to the beach” and “increasing...trips to Male” and offers a “higher salary” to compensate for being away from the employees’ loved ones. All respondents acknowledged the importance of HR efforts in arranging activities that contribute to employee well-being, with L1 noting, “Human Resources in the Maldives, they understand, since it is an isolated area and the mental health being of team members is very important.” L3 mentioned that “cultural trips” were organized by HR for expatriate workers to enhance their understanding of local life. Attending to the matter of gender, HR1 admitted they consider integrating “a female only gym time” which seems insufficient provision for the “40% of female employees” (E3). This finding is considered to be a novelty as previous studies did not explore gender as a specific phenomenon, mainly focusing on religion (Domroes, 2001) and gender roles (Bayhan Karapinar et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). HR1 recognized the impact of isolation on employee well-being and adaptation, particularly evident during employees’ initial “first 2-4 weeks in the Maldives.” The absence of infrastructure, especially in pre-opening resorts, exacerbates the challenge of acclimatizing to an unfamiliar environment. HR1 highlighted the psychological strain associated with isolation, workload and “separation from family...[and] ... social friends,” emphasizing the need for early assessment of employees’ mental health, which is in line with Golden et al.’s (2018) findings. To address this issue, HR1 explains that resorts maintain on-site medical staff to identify “first signs of depression...or anxiety,” with provisions for referral to psychologists in Male, underscoring HR’s proactive approach to employee welfare. Additionally, an “open door policy” operates in the Maldivian resort where HR1 works, facilitating employees’ access to HR staff. This demonstrates that HR and hotels are adapting to changes in order to reduce negative effects of isolation on employees’ well-being (Mullings et al., 2021) and improve business performance (Ponting, 2020).

### ***Career opportunities and professional growth***

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized career growth opportunities within the industry, with E1 noting the availability of “cross-training” and “lectures” for staff interested in development. Despite this, both locals and expatriates noted a lack of training from employers, with local staff (L2) highlighting a scarcity of industry professionals and expatriate workers (E1, E3, and E4) mentioning insufficient education for Maldivian employees. Local employees highlighted the superior career prospects in international resorts compared to local ones, although E3 observed a tendency for locals to go “into stagnation mode” when reaching desired positions due to entrenched attitudes. Contradicting this, local employee L1 noted “a lot of experience [gained] with regards to the hospitality and guest relations in Maldives,” contrasting it with the broader business perspective offered by city hotels. Regarding salary benefits, E3 noted that “the Maldives is now very attractive in terms of salaries”, providing an opportunity “to save a lot” as reported by L1. Overall, some expatriates initially struggled with isolation but eventually found opportunities for career growth. Najeeb (2011) noted that climbing the career ladder is also a possibility for local workers but this was not consistently observed by the expatriates interviewed.

The themes mentioned by the HR manager were aligned with those of the employees but, unsurprisingly, framed more positively. He mentioned two specific training practices: “cross exposure” practice, which allows individuals to “do a 40-hour training” within a desired department and switch roles as well as “internal career transitioning positions.” In an attempt to address the problem of high turnover in the Maldives, HR1 stated they can help with outside transfers, while trying to retain

employees who they try to attract through “salary and benefits” with “an extra \$500”. Previous studies (see Najeeb, 2011; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019) pointed out a significant gap in salaries for expatriates and local workers, prioritizing a need for a change in HRM practices. Professional growth opportunities are also linked to salary considerations (Najeeb, 2011), with HR leveraging strategic incentives like salary extras to attract and retain talent.

Despite employees' adaptability to isolation, separation from family poses a significant challenge particularly for expatriate resort workers. To address this, HR1 notes that psychologist support is available, underscoring a commitment to employee well-being but in a reactive rather than proactive manner. Additionally, HR1 emphasizes equitable treatment for all nationalities and offers monetary benefits and career development programs.

Returning to the research question, this work has demonstrated that the current HRM practices explored in the Maldives anticipate the needs of both expatriate and local employees to a certain extent by providing communication tools, training, financial benefits and reactive psychological help to compensate for isolation, while lacking the required improvements in infrastructure and diversified recreational activities for especially for female workers.

### **Implications for the industry**

This study into the experiences of local and expatriate staff in a remote luxury hospitality setting demonstrates that in such an environment, salaries are unsurprisingly a great attraction and compensate for the living conditions for both locals and expatriates. It has shown too that HR must attend particularly to providing female expatriate workers whose needs have previously not been specifically attended to with appropriate living conditions and activities to safeguard their mental well-being. Clearly defined plans for career growth seem to mitigate feelings of loneliness such remote locations can instill in expatriate workers while the ambition to “climb the ladder” is not experienced in the same way by local workers who express a desire to receive more training from individuals they see as “professionals”. A pro-active stance by HR personnel is recommended to intervene early if signs of difficulty in acclimatizing become apparent and the researchers suggest developing a sense of openness regarding mental health difficulties if these might be seen as troublesome and even shameful depending on the cultures of the individuals concerned.

While the study has provided some insights into how the well-being of employees is affected by working in isolated areas, there are still more questions to be answered. The study has focused only on the area of Maldives. Therefore, conducting an in-depth analysis of the employees working in the luxury segment in different geographical locations could provide valuable insights into more unique challenges faced by staff and the HR response in different types of remote areas including jungles, mountains, savannahs and bushland where high-end luxury establishments are flourishing. Moreover, it is recommended to conduct quantitative research about the effectiveness of HR practices addressing worker well-being in isolated areas. These findings could benefit businesses by integrating initiatives and incentives which would potentially reduce stress and anxiety during the acclimatization period of resort staff.

### **Conclusion**

The study compared employee and HR perspectives on well-being and working conditions in a case study of a luxury resort in the Maldives. Isolation emerged as a significant factor for expatriate workers, leading to negative emotions like depression and anxiety mitigated to some extent by technological solutions to communication. An ability to adapt to the new environment was seen as crucial. HR initiatives focused on promoting work-life balance through activities and services like training programs and reactive psychological support. Nevertheless, restrictions on facility use were noted, along with a lack of activities for women, a novel finding. The study reaffirmed the influence of factors like salary benefits and career opportunities on employee satisfaction and turnover rates, emphasizing HR's role in providing competitive benefits. Overall, the research offers valuable insights into the interplay of isolation, organizational policies, and individual experiences in a remote luxury resort setting.

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