



Strengthening Heritage Tourism: A TOWS Analysis of Maimun Palace Competitiveness amid Cultural Commodification

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ABSTRACT

Heritage tourism plays an important role in preserving historical and cultural values while simultaneously serving as a driver of local economic development. However, the growth of modern tourism has led to cultural commodification, which may affect the competitiveness and authenticity of heritage destinations. Istana Maimun, as one of the cultural tourism icons of Medan City, faces challenges in balancing cultural preservation with the economic demands of tourism. This study aims to analyze the competitiveness of Istana Maimun as a heritage tourism destination amid cultural commodification practices and to formulate sustainable destination strengthening strategies. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The study involved key informants consisting of palace managers, tourism stakeholders, local community representatives, and visitors. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, followed by a TOWS matrix analysis to identify and formulate strategic alternatives based on the interaction of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The findings indicate that Istana Maimun possesses key strengths in its historical value, unique architectural characteristics, and strategic position as a cultural icon, but it is constrained by limitations in facilities, human resources, and the utilization of digital technology. Meanwhile, development opportunities are supported by the growing trend of heritage tourism and digital promotion, while threats arise from excessive cultural commodification and competition from modern tourist destinations. The TOWS analysis generated several priority strategies, including the development of educational and experiential heritage tourism programs, the strengthening of digital marketing and promotion, capacity building for tourism management personnel, collaboration with cultural and tourism stakeholders, and the implementation of cultural commodification control measures to maintain authenticity while enhancing destination competitiveness. Therefore, strengthening strategies that emphasize the development of educational tourism, improvement of management quality, and control of cultural commodification are required to ensure alignment with heritage conservation efforts and the enhancement of destination competitiveness.



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INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on the experience of visiting historical and cultural heritage sites that hold significant value for the identity of a community or region. Heritage tourism not only offers visual experiences but also contributes significantly to the understanding of a society's cultural and historical values (Zhu, 2021). This concept has become one of the rapidly growing tourism segments globally because it successfully combines the preservation of cultural heritage with the promotion of local identity in the context of modern tourism development (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Previous studies have shown that heritage tourism plays an important role in cultural

preservation while promoting socio-economic development through the involvement of local communities and authentic tourist experiences (Zhu, 2021).

Along with the increasing demand for authentic cultural experiences, the phenomenon of cultural commodification has emerged, which refers to the process of transforming cultural elements into products or services that can be sold within the tourism industry. Cultural commodification in tourism is considered a dual process that can generate economic benefits while also posing challenges to the authenticity of culture. Rakhman (2025) suggests that practices of cultural commodification, such as packaging local cultural elements into tourism products, can provide economic benefits to local communities, but they also have the potential to reduce original cultural values to mere commercial commodities. Furthermore, international research on the commercialization of heritage tourism has found that increased commercialization can negatively affect the tourist experience by diminishing their perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction with heritage destinations (ScienceDirect, 2025).

In the context of Indonesia, the Maimun Palace in Medan is one of the heritage tourism attractions that holds high historical and cultural value as a legacy of the Deli Sultanate (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The unique architecture, which blends Malay, European, and Middle Eastern styles, makes it both a cultural icon and a prominent tourist destination in Medan. However, the dynamics of modern tourism development and the practice of cultural commodification have influenced both the tourist experience and the management of this destination. With the growing activities such as the rental of traditional attire, commercial photo areas, and the production of royal-themed souvenirs, the Maimun Palace faces challenges in maintaining the balance between preserving cultural values and capitalizing on its economic potential. A similar phenomenon has been identified in various case studies of cultural tourism in Indonesia, where the transformation of culture into a tourism commodity often raises questions about the boundaries between cultural preservation and commercialization (Zahro & Hartiningsih, 2025).

The competitiveness of heritage tourism is determined not only by the quality of physical resources and supporting facilities but also by the ability of the destination to maintain cultural authenticity while optimizing meaningful tourist experiences. The competitiveness of heritage destinations must accommodate internal factors such as human resources, facilities, and cultural information management, as well as external factors such as economic conditions, policy support, and global tourism trends. Given the complexity of the relationship between cultural preservation and tourism marketing dynamics, a comprehensive strategic analysis is required to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the development of heritage destinations (Mukhlis, Januari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The TOWS analysis is an appropriate tool for developing strategies that take into account the internal-external conditions of the destination, leading to effective and sustainable strategic recommendations.

Nevertheless, previous studies on heritage tourism and cultural commodification have generally emphasized issues of authenticity, tourist satisfaction, community participation, and socio-economic impact, while limited attention has been given to how these issues can be translated into an integrated strategic framework for strengthening the competitiveness of a specific heritage destination. In particular, studies on the Maimun Palace have not sufficiently examined how internal conditions and external environmental factors can be systematically combined to formulate strategic responses to the pressures of cultural commodification. This indicates a research gap in the application of strategic management tools to heritage tourism destinations that are simultaneously required to preserve cultural values and respond to market-oriented tourism development.

The novelty of this study lies in its application of the TOWS analysis to the Maimun Palace as a heritage tourism destination facing cultural commodification. Unlike previous studies that mainly discuss commodification as a socio-cultural phenomenon, this article positions TOWS as an analytical framework to connect strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats with practical strategies for destination competitiveness. Therefore, the study offers a context-specific strategic contribution by formulating preservation-oriented and market-responsive recommendations for the sustainable development of the Maimun Palace.

Based on these phenomena, this article aims to analyze the competitiveness of the Maimun Palace heritage tourism amidst the practices of cultural commodification through a TOWS analysis approach and to formulate strategic recommendations for strengthening the destination that can preserve cultural values while enhancing the tourist appeal sustainably.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, a method widely used in tourism studies to deeply describe social phenomena, including the experiences, perceptions, and practices of heritage destination management without manipulating variables (Aji & Faniza, 2022). The qualitative descriptive method allows the researcher to uncover factual conditions in the field and explain phenomena according to their context through narrative and visual data generated from observations, interviews, and documentation (Aji & Faniza, 2022; Maharani et al., 2025).

The research location is the Maimun Palace, a heritage tourism object in Medan City that represents the cultural heritage of the Deli Sultanate. The research focus is on the management of heritage tourism, forms of cultural commodification, and internal and external factors that influence the competitiveness of the destination. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement, knowledge, and experience in the management, utilization, or observation of Maimun Palace as a heritage tourism destination. The informants included palace management representatives, tourism business practitioners operating around the destination, local cultural stakeholders, and relevant government or tourism actors. This selection was intended to ensure that the data reflected multiple perspectives related to destination management, cultural preservation, tourism services, and competitiveness.

Data collection was carried out through several techniques. First, direct observation in the field to observe tourism activities, supporting facilities, and interactions between tourists and cultural elements. This technique aligns with standard qualitative research practices where the researcher acts as the main instrument to understand social reality in its natural context (Aji & Faniza, 2022). Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with managers, business practitioners, and other related parties to obtain information on their experiences and perceptions regarding destination management and the challenges faced. Third, a documentation study was used to complement the data through a review of official documents, archives, and relevant literature.

Data analysis was performed using the TOWS approach, an extension of the SWOT analysis that is widely used in tourism research to formulate strategies based on internal and external conditions (Maharani et al., 2025). Through this approach, the collected data are processed to identify internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats that affect the competitiveness of Maimun Palace. The determination of TOWS factors was conducted systematically through several stages. First, data from observations, interviews, and documentation were coded according to issues related to destination management, cultural resources, tourism facilities, stakeholder involvement, market potential, institutional support, and external competition. Second, these coded findings were classified into internal factors, consisting of strengths and weaknesses, and external factors, consisting of opportunities and threats. Third, the classified factors were compared and validated through triangulation to ensure that each factor was supported by empirical evidence from the field. Finally, the confirmed factors were arranged in a TOWS matrix to formulate strategic alternatives by combining strengths–opportunities, weaknesses–opportunities, strengths–threats, and weaknesses–threats. Strengthening strategies are then formulated based on the combination of these factors, providing practical recommendations relevant to the context of cultural preservation and enhancing the competitiveness of the destination in a sustainable manner.

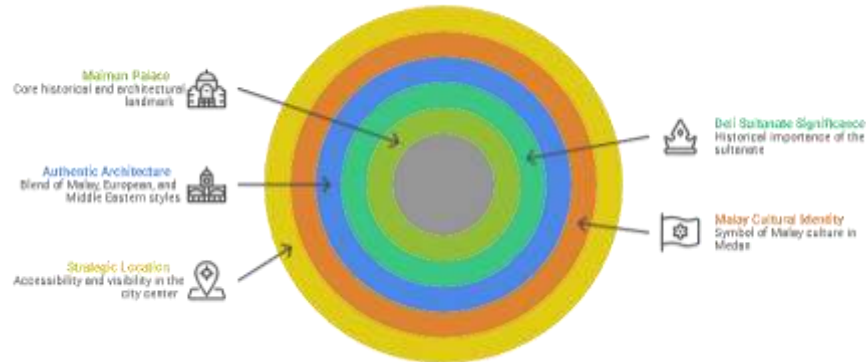
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Current Condition of Maimun Palace as a Heritage Tourism Destination

Observations and interviews indicate that Maimun Palace has a main attraction in the form of the historical significance of the Deli Sultanate and its authentic architecture, which blends Malay,

European, and Middle Eastern elements. The main building retains its authentic character as a royal palace, playing an important role as a symbol of the Malay cultural identity in Medan City. Its strategic location in the city center further strengthens the accessibility and visibility of this destination as a heritage tourism icon.

Maimun Palace Attractions



However, the supporting tourism facilities are still not optimal. The limited availability of historical information boards, the shortage of professional tour guides, and the inadequacy of basic facilities such as toilets and rest areas impact the quality of visitors' experiences. Visitor activities tend to be dominated by photography and visual recreation, while the educational and interpretive aspects of the history have not been maximized. This condition shows that the competitiveness of Maimun Palace cannot rely solely on its physical authenticity, but must also be strengthened through interpretation, visitor management, and heritage-based tourism services.

Cultural Commodification Practices at Maimun Palace

Field findings suggest the presence of notable cultural commodification practices, especially through the rental of traditional Malay clothing, the use of replica thrones as photo backdrops, and the sale of Deli Sultanate-themed souvenirs. These practices provide economic benefits to the management and surrounding communities, while also increasing the destination's appeal to domestic tourists.

On the other hand, commodification that is more oriented toward visual and commercial interests has the potential to shift the cultural and historical meanings of Maimun Palace. Some visitors acknowledge that their visit was more focused on photography activities rather than understanding the historical and cultural values (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). This suggests that commodification has not been fully balanced with an adequate cultural interpretation strategy. Therefore, cultural commodification at Maimun Palace should be managed not merely as an economic activity, but as part of a controlled heritage interpretation strategy that preserves cultural meaning while supporting local economic benefits.

Internal and External Factors Affecting Competitiveness

Based on the TOWS analysis, internal factors of Maimun Palace are dominated by strengths such as architectural authenticity, high historical value, and good accessibility. The main weaknesses include limited conservation budgets, low competence of tourism human resources, a lack of educational facilities, and underutilization of digital technology.

Externally, the greatest opportunities arise from the growing interest in heritage tourism and educational tourism, support for city tourism programs, and the potential for promotion through social media. However, the threats include excessive cultural commodification, low awareness of visitor ethics, competition with modern tourist destinations, and the risk of building damage due to limited conservation funds. To move beyond a descriptive presentation, the internal and external factors were organized into a TOWS matrix. This matrix clarifies the strategic relationship between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and provides a stronger basis for formulating heritage tourism development strategies for Maimun Palace.

The Competitiveness of Maimun Palace from a Heritage Tourism Perspective

Research findings indicate that the competitiveness of Maimun Palace as a heritage tourism destination is highly determined by its ability to maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to the dynamics of modern tourism. This finding aligns with the opinion of Poria et al. (2003), who emphasized that heritage tourists seek meaningful and authentic experiences, rather than mere visual attractions. However, compared with previous studies on heritage tourism competitiveness, the case of Maimun Palace shows that authenticity alone is insufficient to strengthen destination competitiveness. Competitiveness also depends on the ability of heritage managers to transform historical value into accessible interpretation, visitor engagement, and sustainable tourism governance.

The lack of interpretive facilities and tour guides has led to the untapped educational potential of Maimun Palace. In fact, presenting a strong historical narrative could enhance the quality of the visitors' experience and strengthen the destination's image as a center of cultural learning, as suggested by Astuti and Andayani (2024).

Cultural Commodification and Sustainability Challenges

The cultural commodification practices at Maimun Palace demonstrate a dual impact. On one hand, commodification contributes to increased revenue and the sustainability of tourism activities. On the other hand, without proper management, commodification can potentially diminish authenticity and reduce culture to mere consumption for tourists (Cohen, 1988; Greenwood, 1989). This confirms previous arguments that commodification in heritage tourism is not inherently negative, but becomes problematic when cultural symbols are detached from their historical, social, and spiritual meanings. In the context of Maimun Palace, commercial activities may support economic sustainability, but they also risk simplifying Malay royal heritage into a marketable tourist product.

This phenomenon reinforces the concept of staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1976), where culture is re-presented to meet tourists' expectations. Therefore, commodification in heritage destinations must be directed as a tool for cultural education, rather than just an economic activity.

Implications of the TOWS Strategy on Strengthening Heritage Tourism

The resulting TOWS strategy shows that strengthening Maimun Palace's competitiveness should focus on the integration of cultural preservation and innovative management. The SO strategy emphasizes utilizing the historical and architectural strengths to develop educational tourism packages and regular cultural events. The WO strategy highlights the importance of enhancing human resources capacity, developing technology-based interpretive facilities, and forming partnerships with the private sector through CSR programs.

Meanwhile, the ST and WT strategies play a role in controlling the negative impacts of commodification and the threats of building damage through standardizing commercial activities, establishing visitor ethics, and strengthening conservation policies (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This approach is consistent with the findings of Widodo and Astuti (2021), who state that TOWS analysis is effective in formulating sustainable development strategies for heritage destinations. Nevertheless, this study extends previous TOWS-based heritage tourism research by emphasizing that competitiveness and commodification should not be treated as separate issues. In the case of Maimun Palace, competitiveness can only be strengthened when commercial use, cultural interpretation, and conservation policies are balanced through adaptive and culturally sensitive management.

CONCLUSION

The Maimun Palace holds a strong competitive edge as a heritage tourism destination through its authentic architecture, the historical significance of the Deli Sultanate, and its position as a cultural icon of Medan City. This potential serves as the primary capital for developing education-based heritage tourism and cultural preservation. However, the strengthening of its competitiveness is still hindered by limited tourism facilities, low-quality human resources in the tourism sector, limited conservation

budgets, and the suboptimal use of digital technology. This condition leads to a tourist experience that is more focused on visual and recreational activities rather than on understanding historical and cultural values. A TOWS analysis reveals that the development strategy should focus on leveraging the opportunity of increased interest in heritage tourism by developing educational tourism, enhancing human resource capacity, optimizing digital promotion, and controlling the commodification of culture to remain in harmony with the preservation of authenticity. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis is primarily based on stakeholder perceptions and the specific context of Maimun Palace, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other heritage tourism destinations with different socio-cultural and management characteristics. In addition, the study does not quantitatively assess the long-term impacts of the proposed strategies on tourist satisfaction, economic performance, or heritage conservation outcomes. With an integrated and sustainable strategy, Maimun Palace has the potential to grow into a competitive heritage tourism destination while maintaining cultural values and local identity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. All research findings, data collection, and analysis were conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes of this study.

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