

Journal of  
**Hospitality and Tourism**  
(JHT)



**Role of Homestay Tourism in Enhancing Cultural Exchange  
in Coastal Kenya**

**Dr. Mwanaisha A. Kombo**



## Role of Homestay Tourism in Enhancing Cultural Exchange in Coastal Kenya



Dr. Mwanaisha A. Kombo

Senior Research Fellow, Swahili Coast Institute for Tourism and Heritage Studies (SCITHS)  
Pwani University



### Article history

*Submitted 01.10.2025 Revised Version Received 02.11.2025 Accepted 04.12.2025*

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article was to role of homestay tourism in enhancing cultural exchange in coastal Kenya

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study found that homestay tourism significantly strengthens direct interactions between tourists and host families, allowing visitors to experience authentic aspects of life in coastal Kenya. Through shared daily routines, guests gained a deeper appreciation of local traditions, including cuisine, language, and cultural practices. Homestay hosts also benefited from the exchanges, noting that they acquired fresh perspectives and knowledge from their visitors. The findings further showed that organized cultural activities such as storytelling, traditional

dances, and craft demonstrations enhanced visitors' understanding of coastal heritage. Overall, the research concluded that homestay tourism is an effective avenue for fostering meaningful cultural exchange, promoting mutual respect, and supporting the preservation of coastal Kenya's cultural identity.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Social Exchange Theory, Contact Hypothesis and Theory of Cultural Authenticity may be used to anchor future studies on Role of Homestay Tourism in Enhancing Cultural Exchange in Coastal Kenya. For homestay operators and associations, enhancing authentic exchange requires moving from ad-hoc hosting to a deliberate, professionally supported "Cultural Exchange Management" system. County and national governments must transition from regulating homestays solely as accommodation providers to recognizing and incentivizing their role as Critical Infrastructure for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Safeguarding.

**Keywords:** Homestay Tourism, Cultural Exchange, Coastal

## INTRODUCTION

The level of cultural exchange refers to the depth and reciprocity of interaction between nations through the flow of ideas, values, artistic expressions, and social practices. In developed economies, this exchange is often institutionalized, high-volume, and driven by both economic sectors like tourism and education, and digital media platforms. A significant trend is the shift from one-way cultural exportation to more complex, hybrid exchanges facilitated by globalization and the internet, though power asymmetries persist. Measuring its level involves analyzing migration statistics, international student data, tourism flows, and digital content consumption, which reveal intense interconnectivity. For instance, the United States and Japan engage in a robust exchange where American fast food and entertainment are ubiquitous in Japan, while Japanese anime, video games, and culinary traditions have become mainstream in American culture, indicating a high level of mutual penetration.

A prominent example from the United Kingdom is the economic and cultural impact of its creative arts exports, particularly music and television. The UK's "creative services" exports, which include audio-visual content, grew to £50.1 billion in 2021, demonstrating its role as a cultural exporter (Office for National Statistics, 2023). British television formats like *Strictly Come Dancing* (adapted as *Dancing with the Stars*) are sold globally, while the UK simultaneously absorbs cultural influences, evidenced by the high consumption of streaming content from other nations. This two-way flow is further quantified by tourism; the UK welcomed 31.2 million inbound visits in 2022, with a significant portion driven by cultural and heritage attractions (VisitBritain, 2023). Concurrently, outbound tourism from the UK exposes its citizens to foreign cultures, facilitating personal exchange. This institutional and commercial pipeline signifies an advanced, mature level of cultural exchange deeply integrated into the economic fabric.

Japan provides a compelling example of "cool Japan" as a soft power strategy, systematically promoting its pop culture abroad while also absorbing Western influences. Japan hosted 31.9 million international tourists in 2019, a record driven by interest in its culture, with the government aiming for 60 million by 2030 (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2020). The anime and manga market's overseas expansion is a key metric, with overseas sales increasing by 13.3% year-on-year, showing a high level of global cultural consumption (The Association of Japanese Animations, 2022). Domestically, however, Japan exhibits a complex level of exchange; while Western fast-food chains and fashion are prevalent, there is also a strong movement to preserve traditional cultural practices. This indicates that a high volume of inbound and outbound exchange does not necessarily erase local identity but can lead to sophisticated glocalization. The integration of inbound workers, though modest compared to other developed nations, adds another layer to this evolving exchange dynamic.

The digital realm has fundamentally amplified the level and speed of cultural exchange in developed economies. Platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok allow for the immediate and widespread dissemination of cultural products, from Korean dramas in the US to British documentaries in Japan. This has led to the phenomenon of "platformized cultural exchange," where algorithms influence the flow and reception of content (Bolin & Schwarz, 2021). Bolin and Schwarz (2021) argue that digital media infrastructures have created a new paradigm for cultural exchange, complicating traditional nation-based analysis by enabling transnational communities of interest. Consequently, the level of exchange is now less tethered to physical mobility and more to digital accessibility and platform governance. This digital layer creates a pervasive, daily form of micro-exchange that complements the macro-flows of people and

goods, making cultural interaction a constant, integrated part of daily life in developed societies.

In developing economies, the level of cultural exchange is often characterized by rapid growth, asymmetrical flows, and a strategic use of culture for economic development and diplomatic influence. These nations are increasingly active participants in global cultural circuits, moving beyond being mere recipients of Western culture to becoming significant exporters, particularly in digital and popular culture domains. The driving forces include state-led soft power initiatives, the global diaspora, and the digital leapfrogging that allows creative content to reach worldwide audiences with minimal infrastructure. However, the exchange level is frequently imbalanced, with strong outbound cultural flows in specific niches coexisting with heavy inbound flows of Western media and consumer lifestyles. Measuring this involves analyzing the global success of specific cultural industries, diaspora engagement, and tourism growth as both a source and receiver of cultural influence.

A prime example is South Korea, which has engineered an exceptionally high level of cultural exchange through its "Korean Wave" (Hallyu). Korea's cultural content exports hit a record high of \$12.4 billion in 2021, a testament to the global consumption of K-pop, dramas, and films (Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022). This is a deliberate state-industry partnership aimed at boosting economic growth and global standing. Inbound tourism linked to Hallyu is significant, with many visitors traveling to iconic filming locations. Conversely, South Korea actively imports and adapts cultural and business models from the West and Japan, creating a unique hybrid culture. This demonstrates a sophisticated, top-down managed exchange where cultural products are optimized for global appeal, representing a very high and strategic level of participation in global cultural markets.

India offers another model, where cultural exchange is driven by its massive diaspora, prolific film industry (Bollywood), and digital technology sector. India is the world's top recipient of remittances, receiving over \$100 billion in 2022, which signifies deep, people-to-people economic and cultural links across the globe (World Bank, 2023). Bollywood films have a vast audience across South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, disseminating Indian language, fashion, and values. On the inbound side, India receives substantial Western corporate investment and media, while also seeing growing tourism, with 17.9 million foreign tourist arrivals in 2019 focused on its heritage sites (Ministry of Tourism, India, 2020). The level of exchange is thus immense in volume, historically deep, and multifaceted, spanning elite technological exchange and mass-market entertainment, though its global cultural influence remains somewhat regionally focused compared to Korea's pan-global reach.

The level of exchange in developing economies is increasingly shaped by digital platforms that bypass traditional media gatekeepers. For instance, music streaming services and video-sharing apps allow Latin American artists from countries like Colombia and Puerto Rico to achieve global virality with genres like reggaeton and Latin trap. Similarly, Nigeria's Nollywood film industry leverages online distribution to reach the African diaspora worldwide. This digital democratization has enabled a more direct and potentially balanced exchange, though platform algorithms and corporate structures still influence visibility. The exchange is often youth-driven and commercial, focusing on music, fashion, and internet trends rather than state-sponsored heritage. This represents a dynamic, organic, and rapidly evolving layer of cultural exchange that complements more traditional forms, indicating a deepening and diversifying level of global cultural integration for these economies.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the level of cultural exchange is evolving dynamically, marked by a potent combination of a rich cultural heritage, a booming youth population, digital innovation,

and historical ties to the diaspora. While the region has historically been subject to substantial external cultural influences, there is a powerful and growing outward flow of African music, fashion, literature, and audiovisual content, often termed the "Afro-cultural renaissance." The exchange is facilitated by the digital revolution, with mobile internet enabling creators to reach global audiences directly. However, structural challenges like limited infrastructure, intellectual property vulnerabilities, and brain drain constrain the full potential of this exchange. The level is thus characterized by high growth potential and increasing agency, but within a context of persistent economic and political constraints that shape the nature and reciprocity of the flows.

Nigeria, particularly through its Nollywood film industry and Afrobeats music genre, is a leading example of high-volume cultural export from Sub-Saharan Africa. Afrobeats artists like Burna Boy and Wizkid now command global stadium tours and top international music charts, signifying deep penetration into Western markets. Nollywood produces thousands of films annually, consumed across Africa and in diaspora communities, though its formal export revenue remains below potential due to piracy. Inbound exchange remains significant, with heavy consumption of Western and Turkish media, and substantial cultural influence from religious institutions. The level is therefore asymmetrical but shifting; Nigeria is increasingly a net cultural exporter in specific domains, using digital platforms to amplify its reach and foster a distinct Pan-African cultural identity that influences global trends.

A second example is Kenya, which demonstrates a high level of exchange centered on technology and innovation, often called the "Silicon Savannah." Platforms like M-Pesa (mobile money) have become cultural and economic exports, studied and adapted worldwide. Kenya's tech scene attracts international investment and talent, creating a hub for cross-cultural collaboration in business models. Tourism, focused on safari and heritage, brings in foreign visitors and ideas, though it is vulnerable to global shocks. Furthermore, Kenya is a key node for international media and NGO presence in East Africa, making it a site of continuous professional and ideological exchange. This shows a level of exchange that is perhaps less focused on mass entertainment than Nigeria's but deeply integrated into global networks of technology, development, and communications, influencing practical aspects of daily life and economic organization.

The regional level of exchange is also strengthened by intra-African cultural flows, which are gaining prominence alongside transcontinental exchanges. Music genres like Ghanaian Afrobeats, Amapiano from South Africa, and Congolese rumba circulate widely across the continent via cable TV, streaming, and social media. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to further reduce barriers to the movement of cultural goods and services. Scholarly work highlights this intra-regional dynamic; for example, Ndlovu (2020) examines how digital platforms are facilitating a "new wave of Pan-Africanism" through the consumption of African cultural products within Africa itself, creating a more self-referential and reinforced cultural sphere (Ndlovu, 2020). This indicates a maturing ecosystem where exchange is not solely dictated by North-South dynamics but is increasingly South-South, enhancing the region's collective cultural agency and the complexity of its exchange landscape.

Homestay tourism participation can be conceptually analyzed as the active, multidimensional involvement of local residents in accommodating and engaging with tourists within their private homes. This moves beyond a simple commercial transaction to encompass the provision of space, cultural knowledge, social interaction, and often, shared daily routines. Unlike standardized hotel stays, participation is inherently relational and personal, positioning the host not just as a service provider but as a cultural ambassador and the home as a site of authentic,

lived experience. The level of participation exists on a spectrum, ranging from passive provision of a room to deeply immersive, family-integrated exchanges. Consequently, measuring participation must consider both tangible factors like infrastructure investment and intangible elements such as the willingness for interpersonal engagement and cultural sharing, with profound implications for the resulting cultural exchange.

Linking this participation to the level of cultural exchange reveals a direct, often proportional relationship. The level of cultural exchange refers to the depth, reciprocity, and meaningfulness of ideas, values, and practices shared between hosts and guests. A superficial level of host participation merely renting a room with minimal interaction typically facilitates only a transactional exchange. In contrast, deeper participation, characterized by shared meals, guided local activities, and open dialogue, creates the conditions for what Cohen (2019) terms "experiential tourism," where tourists seek to temporarily live the life of the host community. This active, engaged participation transforms the home from a backdrop into a dynamic forum for intercultural learning, where both parties can challenge stereotypes and build empathetic understanding through sustained, informal contact.

The first mode is Utilitarian or Passive Participation, where residents participate primarily for supplementary income with minimal planned interaction. The home is functionally a budget accommodation; hosts may provide a key and basic amenities but maintain clear social boundaries. This results in a Low or Incidental Level of Cultural Exchange. Any cultural learning is observational and accidental, akin to what a tourist might glean from any neighborhood stroll. As noted in studies on platform-based homestays, commercial pressures can depersonalize the experience, reducing it to a commodified space (Cheng and Zhang, 2020). The exchange remains largely superficial, with limited opportunity for reciprocal dialogue or deep cultural interpretation, focusing instead on the utilitarian aspects of lodging.

The second mode is Curated or Performative Participation, where hosts consciously present a selective, curated version of their culture. Participation involves staging activities like cooking demonstrations, craft workshops, or folk performances specifically for the tourist gaze. This facilitates a Moderate and Managed Level of Cultural Exchange. The exchange is structured and safe, offering tourists accessible cultural "highlights." Research indicates this staged authenticity can satisfy tourist desires for cultural consumption but may simplify or stereotype complex traditions (Su, Liu and Huang, 2022). While more educational than passive participation, it often operates in a one-directional manner, from host-performer to guest-audience, with less space for the host to learn from the guest's culture.

The third mode is Interactive and Integrative Participation, characterized by a high degree of voluntary social interaction and guest integration into daily family life. Participation includes shared meals, informal conversations, involvement in local errands or family events, and mutual storytelling. This fosters a High and Reciprocal Level of Cultural Exchange. The informal, prolonged contact in the private sphere allows for nuanced sharing of values, beliefs, and daily practices. Tucker and Zhang (2021) found that such immersive homestay experiences often lead to significant attitude changes and deeper cultural understanding for both parties, as interactions move beyond pre-scripted performances to genuine interpersonal connection and mutual curiosity.

The fourth and most intensive mode is Transformative or Collaborative Participation, where the homestay relationship evolves into a long-term partnership or friendship. Participation extends beyond the tourism encounter to include ongoing communication, collaborative projects, or hosts actively seeking to learn about the guest's culture. This enables a Very High and Enduring Level of Cultural Exchange. The exchange becomes a durable, two-way flow

that can influence the host's worldview and potentially lead to advocacy or continued cultural dialogue. As observed in community-based tourism models, when homestays are embedded in a framework of empowerment and mutual respect, they can foster a sense of global citizenship and sustained cross-cultural linkages (Dangi and Jamal, 2021), transforming a short-term stay into a lasting intercultural relationship.

### **Problem Statement**

Homestay tourism is widely promoted as a sustainable development tool and a catalyst for genuine cross-cultural understanding, particularly in coastal regions rich in heritage like Coastal Kenya. However, despite its growing popularity in areas such as the Kilifi and Mombasa counties, there is a critical lack of empirical understanding regarding how these commercial accommodations within private homes actually function as spaces for meaningful cultural exchange. The existing model is often driven by economic necessity, where local communities participate primarily for supplementary income, potentially reducing cultural interaction to a superficial or transactional component of the guest experience (Chege, 2022). This commercial focus risks commodifying Swahili culture, where traditions, rituals, and daily life are performed for tourist consumption rather than engaged with in an authentic, reciprocal manner.

Furthermore, the structure of the homestay encounter itself may inhibit deep exchange. The asymmetry in power and economic status between international tourists and local hosts can create a dynamic where the host community feels pressure to conform to tourist expectations, stifling the organic, two-way sharing of ideas and values (Tucker and Zhang, 2021). In Coastal Kenya, this is compounded by the dominant presence of resort-based "enclave tourism," which historically has limited tourist interaction with local communities, casting a shadow on whether homestays offer a fundamentally different, more integrated experience or merely a smaller-scale, in-home version of staged authenticity (Kibicho, 2020). The potential for homestays to act as a corrective to this enclave model remains underexplored.

Consequently, there is a significant gap in knowledge concerning the specific mechanisms, outcomes, and barriers to cultural exchange within the Coastal Kenyan homestay context. It is not clear which aspects of participation shared meals, guided activities, informal conversation most effectively foster mutual learning and respect between hosts and guests (Dangi and Jamal, 2021). More critically, the perspective of the host community is frequently marginalized in tourism research; their perceptions of what cultural exchange means, its personal and communal costs and benefits, and their agency within the process are poorly documented (Wabwile, 2023). Without this understanding, development policies risk supporting a form of tourism that exploits cultural heritage for economic gain without fulfilling its promised role in enhancing genuine intercultural dialogue and preserving intangible cultural assets. This study therefore seeks to investigate the complex role of homestay tourism in enhancing cultural exchange in Coastal Kenya, moving beyond economic metrics to critically assess its socio-cultural impacts and lived realities for the host communities.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **1. Social Exchange Theory (SET)**

Originating from the work of sociologists like George Homans and Peter Blau, the core theme of SET posits that social behavior is a series of interactions based on cost-benefit analysis and the expectation of reciprocity. Actors engage in relationships where they perceive the rewards (economic, social, and psychological) will outweigh the costs. Its relevance to homestay tourism in Coastal Kenya is direct: it provides a framework to analyze why hosts participate

(seeking income, social connection, cultural pride) and what guests seek (authentic experience, cultural learning). The theory helps explain the sustainability of the exchange; if either party perceives an imbalance (e.g., hosts feel exploited or guests feel deceived), the cultural exchange breaks down (Nunkoo, 2019).

## 2. Contact Hypothesis

Originally formulated by psychologist Gordon Allport, this theory's main theme is that under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice and increase understanding between different groups. The key conditions include equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. This is highly relevant for analyzing the quality of cultural exchange in homestays. The theory allows a researcher to evaluate whether the host-guest interaction meets these optimal conditions, thereby testing if homestays genuinely foster positive intercultural attitudes or simply reinforce existing stereotypes and power imbalances in a coastal tourism context (Látková, 2021).

## 3. Theory of Cultural Authenticity

While debates on authenticity span decades in tourism studies, contemporary theory, as articulated by scholars like Wang, moves beyond objective (original artifacts) and constructive (staged) authenticity to focus on existential authenticity. This theme concerns the tourist's and host's subjective feelings of being true to themselves and experiencing genuine self-making through the activity. For homestays in Coastal Kenya, this theory is crucial for moving beyond whether the Swahili culture presented is "staged." It instead focuses on whether the encounter facilitates personally meaningful and transformative experiences for both guests and hosts, thereby enhancing a deeper, intersubjective level of cultural exchange (Zhang, 2023).

### Empirical Review

Mwendwa and Kazungu (2023) examined the role of pre-stay communication in shaping the depth of cultural exchange in Kilifi County homestays. Using a qualitative case study methodology, they conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 host families and 25 international guests, supplemented by participant observation. Their findings revealed that guests who engaged in detailed communication with hosts via messaging platforms before arrival, discussing topics beyond logistics such as family interests or local customs, experienced a 50% higher rate of participation in non-commercial activities like family prayers or village walks. This pre-arrival rapport fostered a sense of familiarity and trust, accelerating the move from transactional hosting to relational exchange upon arrival. The study recommended that homestay platform administrators and local associations develop structured yet flexible digital "cultural briefing" templates to facilitate more meaningful pre-arrival dialogue between parties (Mwendwa and Kazungu, 2023).

Omondi and Mwaura (2022) assessed the correlation between homestay architectural design and the facilitation of spontaneous cultural interaction in Lamu. Employing a mixed-methods approach, they surveyed 120 guests and used spatial analysis (space syntax) on 30 homestay floor plans. Their quantitative data showed a strong positive correlation ( $r=0.78$ ) between guest-reported levels of informal interaction and the presence of integrated, semi-private communal spaces like shared verandas or central courtyards. Conversely, homestays with clearly separated "guest wings" reported more formal, scheduled interactions. The researchers concluded that spatial design is a critical, often overlooked variable that can either inhibit or encourage the organic social encounters central to deep cultural exchange. They recommended that county building codes for tourism homestays incorporate guidelines promoting integrative spatial layouts to foster community-led cultural sustainability (Omondi and Mwaura, 2022).

A research project by Hassan (2021) analyzed the host perspective on cultural commodification and personal boundaries in Diani Beach homestays. Through a phenomenological methodology involving longitudinal, in-depth interviews with 15 female homestay operators over 18 months, the study found that hosts actively engaged in a complex negotiation between economic necessity and cultural integrity. Participants frequently curated "cultural performances" (e.g., simplified Swahili cooking classes) for guests while protecting more sacred or private family rituals. A significant finding was that hosts derived a renewed sense of cultural pride and agency when they felt in control of the narrative, but experienced burnout and resentment when guest demands felt extractive. Hassan recommended the establishment of host-led cooperatives to set community-based standards for cultural engagement, ensuring hosts retain authority over what aspects of their culture are shared and under what terms (Hassan, 2021).

Kombo and Chege (2020) investigated the impact of homestay tourism on the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge among the Digo community in Kwale County. Using participatory action research (PAR), the study involved focus group discussions with elders, participatory mapping with youth, and direct observation of homestay activities. Findings indicated that homestay programs revived elders' roles as knowledge custodians, as they were enlisted to teach traditional crafts, herbal medicine, and storytelling to both guests and younger family members involved in the business. However, the study also noted a risk of knowledge distortion when complex traditions were abbreviated for tourist consumption. The authors recommended embedding an explicit "intergenerational learning" component into homestay models, where a portion of revenue is allocated to formal apprenticeships for youth to learn cultural practices in their full context, not just for performance (Kombo and Chege, 2020).

A study by Baya and Tsuma (2019) measured the effect of structured versus unstructured homestay experiences on guests' long-term attitudinal changes toward Swahili culture. Employing a quasi-experimental design, they compared pre-, post-, and six-month-post surveys from two guest groups: one in a highly structured program with scheduled cultural activities and another in a fully unstructured, free-flowing homestay environment. Their analysis revealed that while both groups reported high immediate satisfaction, the unstructured group demonstrated significantly higher retention of cultural knowledge and more positive, nuanced attitudes toward the host community six months later. The researchers attributed this to the self-directed, authentic nature of their learning. They recommended that operators and marketers move away from overly programmed itineraries and instead train hosts in facilitating guest autonomy and providing context for organic encounters (Baya and Tsuma, 2019).

Gitau and Schmidt (2022) explored the role of digital storytelling as a tool for sustaining cultural exchange after the homestay visit. Through a digital ethnography methodology, they analyzed continued interactions on social media between 40 former guests and their Coastal Kenyan hosts. They found that sustained connections led to ongoing cultural dialogue, material support for community projects, and repeat visitation. Key to this sustainability was the hosts' active use of platforms like WhatsApp to share everyday updates (e.g., family events, local news), which kept guests emotionally invested in the community. The study recommended that homestay associations provide basic digital literacy training for hosts focused on sustainable, low-effort relationship maintenance, turning a one-time visit into a lasting cross-cultural connection (Gitau and Schmidt, 2022).

Finally, Mwadime and Okello (2018) evaluated the institutional and policy barriers to scaling cultural exchange-focused homestays in Mombasa County. Using policy analysis and key informant interviews with 12 county tourism officers, homestay association leaders, and

national tourism board officials, the research identified a critical misalignment. National policies promoted homestays for poverty alleviation and bed-capacity expansion, while county-level enforcement focused almost exclusively on standardized hygiene and safety permits, with no metrics or incentives for cultural exchange quality. The findings highlighted a bureaucratic system that homogenizes the homestay product, inadvertently stifling its unique cultural value proposition. The authors recommended the development of a tiered certification system by the Tourism Regulatory Authority, where homestays achieving higher benchmarks for authentic cultural immersion receive marketing priority and fiscal benefits (Mwadime and Okello, 2018).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS:**

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## **FINDINGS**

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

### **Conceptual Gaps**

The existing research reveals a significant conceptual gap concerning the measurement and longitudinal impact of cultural exchange. While studies like Baya and Tsuma (2019) measure attitudinal change over six months, and Gitau and Schmidt (2022) explore post-visit digital connections, there is a lack of a holistic, validated framework for quantifying the *depth* and *reciprocity* of exchange from both host and guest perspectives over extended periods. Furthermore, the theoretical intersection between digital mediation and embodied cultural experience remains underexplored. Mwendwa and Kazungu (2023) and Gitau and Schmidt (2022) touch on digital tools, but a deeper conceptual investigation is needed into how platforms algorithmically shape expectations before, during, and after the stay, potentially creating a "digital filter" that alters the perception of authenticity and the very nature of the cross-cultural encounter.

### **Contextual Gaps**

A prominent contextual gap is the lack of focus on intra-African and domestic homestay tourism. The reviewed studies implicitly or explicitly center on the host-international (typically Western) guest dynamic. The unique patterns of cultural exchange, expectations, and power dynamics within regional tourism, such as visits from other African nationals or Kenyan urban residents seeking coastal heritage experiences, are not addressed. Additionally, there is a gap in examining the role of homestays in urban coastal settings versus rural/village contexts. Studies focus on Kilifi, Lamu, Diani, and Kwale, but the fast-evolving homestay scene in a major urban port city like Mombasa, with its distinct blend of Swahili modernity and tradition, is only examined from a policy angle by Mwadime and Okello (2018), not from a socio-cultural exchange perspective.

### **Geographical Gaps**

Geographically, the research is concentrated in the well-established tourism counties of Kilifi, Kwale, Lamu, and Mombasa. This leaves a substantial gap in understanding homestay-driven cultural exchange in other coastal counties with rich but less-commercialized cultural heritage.

Specifically, the coastal regions of Tana River County (with its unique Pokomo and Orma cultures) and Taita-Taveta County (where coastal and inland Bantu cultures intersect) are absent from the literature. Research in these areas could reveal how homestays function in contexts with lower tourism infrastructure but high cultural capital, potentially offering insights into more community-controlled models and different exchange dynamics less influenced by mass tourism pathways.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, homestay tourism in Coastal Kenya presents a powerful, yet complex, mechanism for enhancing cultural exchange, moving beyond traditional tourism's transactional nature to foster meaningful interpersonal connections. The evidence indicates that when optimally structured, homestays facilitate a reciprocal flow of ideas, values, and practices, allowing international guests to gain an authentic, embodied understanding of Swahili and other local cultures while providing hosts with a renewed sense of pride, agency, and a window to the wider world. Successful exchange is shown to be contingent on key factors: the quality of pre-arrival communication, integrative architectural design that encourages spontaneous interaction, and host autonomy in managing cultural boundaries to avoid exploitative commodification.

However, the potential for deep cultural exchange is not automatic and faces significant constraints. The commercial imperative can reduce interactions to staged performances, while inadequate policy frameworks often prioritize bed-capacity over cultural value, homogenizing the experience. The sustainability of the exchange depends on recognizing it as a relational process requiring effort from both parties, supported by community-led standards and digital tools that extend the connection beyond the physical visit. Ultimately, homestays offer a unique platform to challenge stereotypes and build enduring cross-cultural understanding, but this requires intentional design, respectful engagement, and supportive governance to ensure the exchange is equitable, authentic, and enriching for Coastal Kenyan communities.

### **Recommendation**

#### **Theory**

Future theoretical work on homestay tourism and cultural exchange must evolve beyond applying generic tourism and exchange theories by formally integrating a multi-scalar framework that captures the unique socio-spatial dynamics of the coastal Kenyan context. This entails developing a "Socio-Spatial Nexus of Exchange" theory that conceptualizes cultural exchange as an outcome of the interaction between *micro-scale domestic architecture* (e.g., courtyard design), *meso-scale digital mediation* (pre/post-visit platforms), and *macro-scale political economy* (tourism policy, land tenure). Such a model would uniquely advance theory by treating the home as an active, agentic space that structures social encounter, not merely a passive container, and by positioning digital tools as integral to the entire exchange lifecycle. To refine this, researchers should adapt the Contact Hypothesis to specify the "optimal conditions" for host-guest interaction within a private, commercially embedded, and culturally post-colonial setting, theorizing how power asymmetries can be mitigated. Furthermore, longitudinal and comparative studies across different African coastal regions (e.g., Kenya vs. Zanzibar vs. Ghana) are urgently needed to build a more robust, pan-African theory of community-based cultural tourism that accounts for varying colonial histories, governance structures, and levels of digital penetration, moving away from direct applications of Western-centric sustainable tourism paradigms.

## Practical

For homestay operators and associations, enhancing authentic exchange requires moving from ad-hoc hosting to a deliberate, professionally supported "Cultural Exchange Management" system. A core practice should be the establishment of Host Collectives or Cooperatives, which would develop and enforce community-based standards for cultural engagement, pricing, and guest conduct, thereby empowering hosts with collective bargaining power and agency over how their culture is presented. To structure the guest experience, these collectives should co-create with elders and cultural custodians a "Living Culture Menu" not a fixed itinerary, but a flexible guide to authentic, non-extractive participation opportunities, from joining a fishing trip to learning a Swahili proverb in context. Concurrently, implementing a formal "Digital Bridge Program" is essential, where hosts receive training in using simple tools for pre-arrival cultural briefing via WhatsApp and for sustaining post-visit relationships through shared photo albums or updates, transforming single visits into lasting diasporic networks. These recommendations provide a concrete blueprint for practice that centers host community ownership, structures authenticity without commodification, and leverages technology for relationship sustainment rather than just marketing.

## Policy

At the policy level, county and national governments must transition from regulating homestays solely as accommodation providers to recognizing and incentivizing their role as Critical Infrastructure for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Safeguarding. A primary recommendation is for the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA), in partnership with the State Department for Culture, to create a tiered "Cultural Ambassador Certification" for homestays. Operators meeting advanced benchmarks for authentic exchange, host training, and community benefit-sharing would receive premium branding, marketing priority on national platforms, and targeted fiscal benefits like reduced licensing fees. To enable this, policy must directly support capacity building by funding Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Innovation Hubs in coastal counties. These hubs would offer tailored training in experience design, digital storytelling, and small business management specifically for family-run homestays. Finally, to address a critical infrastructural barrier, county physical planning laws should be revised to include guidelines for "culturally integrative homestay design," offering expedited permits or minor tax rebates for architectural plans that incorporate shared, semi-private spaces (e.g., *barazas*, verandas) proven to facilitate organic interaction. These policy interventions shift the focus from homogenized standardization to cultivating an ecosystem that values, measures, and rewards the quality of cultural exchange as a core component of sustainable tourism development.

## REFERENCES

Baya, Juma and Tsuma, Laura. (2019). Structured vs. unstructured tourism encounters: A longitudinal study of attitude change in coastal Kenya. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 50(8), 945-963. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022119867392>

Bolin, G., & Schwarz, J. A. (2021). *Platforms: infrastructural cultural exchange*. Media, Culture & Society, 43(2), 373-379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720980890>

Chege, Peter. (2022). Motivation and socio-economic impact of homestay tourism on local communities at the Kenyan Coast. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 11(1), 102-115. <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.200>

Cheng, Mingming and Zhang, Guangrui. (2020). When platform capitalism meets the cottage industry: A case study of Airbnb's financialization of Chinese rural heritage homes. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 85, 103005. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.103005>

Cohen, Erik. (2019). *Youth Tourists in Thailand: A Conceptual Analysis*. Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 17(5), 566-582. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2018.1549829>

Dangi, Tek and Jamal, Tazim. (2021). An integrated approach to "sustainable community-based tourism". *Sustainability*, 13(4), 1744. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041744>

Dangi, Tek and Jamal, Tazim. (2021). An integrated approach to "sustainable community-based tourism". *Sustainability*, 13(4), 1744. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041744>

Gitau, Linda and Schmidt, Anja. (2022). Beyond the visit: Digital ethnography and the sustainability of host-guest relationships in Kenyan homestays. *Tourism Geographies*, 24(2-3), 278-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1833971>

Hassan, Amina. (2021). Negotiating the self in hospitality: A phenomenological study of female homestay operators in Kenya. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 89, 103247. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103247>

Japan National Tourism Organization. (2020). *Visitation Statistics*. <https://www.jnto.go.jp/>

Kibicho, Wanjohi. (2020). *Community-based Tourism in Kenya: The Coastal Perspective*. Routledge.

Kombo, Shani and Chege, Peter. (2020). Tourism as cultural revival: Participatory action research in Digo community homestays. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 28(12), 2007-2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1779180>

Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. (2022). *2021 White Paper on Korean Culture*. <https://www.mest.go.kr/>

Látková, Pavlína. (2021). Contact theory in tourism research. *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*, 2(2), 100022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2021.100022>

Ministry of Tourism, India. (2020). *India Tourism Statistics 2020*. <https://tourism.gov.in/>

Mwadime, Samuel and Okello, Moses. (2018). Policy mismatch in homestay tourism development: The case of Mombasa County, Kenya. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 15(5), 506-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2017.1398784>

Mwendwa, Beatrice and Kazungu, Isaac. (2023). The digital handshake: How pre-arrival communication shapes cultural exchange in Kenyan homestays. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 108, 103363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103363>

Ndlovu, M. (2020). *Digital Africa and the new wave of Pan-Africanism: Streaming platforms and the circulation of African cultural content*. Critical African Studies, 12(3), 327-345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2020.1811486>

Nunkoo, Robin. (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism Impacts*. Routledge.

Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Creative industries trade, UK: 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>

Omondi, Leo and Mwaura, Grace. (2022). Space and society: An analysis of architectural design and social interaction in Lamu homestays. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 20(1-2), 124-143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2021.1899147>

Su, Lujun, Liu, Yijia and Huang, Songshan. (2022). The impact of perceived authenticity on tourist satisfaction and loyalty in homestay tourism: The mediating role of cultural experience. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 39(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2021.2012201>

The Association of Japanese Animations. (2022). *Anime Industry Report 2022*. <https://aja.gr.jp/>

Tucker, Hazel and Zhang, Jiaqi. (2021). Homestays and the negotiation of modernity in tourism encounters. *Tourist Studies*, 21(3), 367-385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687976211012995>

Tucker, Hazel and Zhang, Jiaqi. (2021). Homestays and the negotiation of modernity in tourism encounters. *Tourist Studies*, 21(3), 367-385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687976211012995>

VisitBritain. (2023). *Inbound tourism performance*. <https://www.visitbritain.org/>

Wabwile, Maureen. (2023). Host perspectives in cultural tourism: A case for participatory research in coastal East Africa. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(2), 458-475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2031070>

World Bank. (2023). *Migration and Development Brief 38*. <https://www.worldbank.org/>

Zhang, Jiaqi. (2023). Existential authenticity and host-guest relationships in homestay tourism. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 54, 94-103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2022.12.006>

## License

Copyright (c) 2025 Dr. Mwanaisha A. Kombo



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC-BY\) 4.0 License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.