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# Has Traditional Georgian Hospitality Been Sustained Under Tourism Development?

## Evidence from the High-Mountain Regions of Georgia

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People in the mountainous regions of Georgia have embraced new development pathways in recent years. Residents are taking advantage of the area's rapid increase in tourism, as settlements on the Caucasus

Mountain slopes constitute some of the most visited tourist destinations in the country. The specific objective of this study was to determine whether the long-standing tradition of Georgian hospitality has sustained its cultural identity or has been commodified under accelerated tourism development. A grounded theory approach was used as a theoretical basis to explore primary findings. Empirical data were collected through interviews,

participant observation, and guest reviews from the website booking.com. Texts were processed using qualitative data analysis software. The open-coded narratives revealed new forms of Georgian hospitality in guesthouse services amid waves of commodification of guest–host relationships. Maintenance of deeply rooted traditional behavior of the host communities under rapidly increasing tourism constitutes a firm foundation for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** hospitality; augmented product; tourism; mountain; tradition; commodification; digital travel data; hybrid approach; Georgia.

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### Introduction

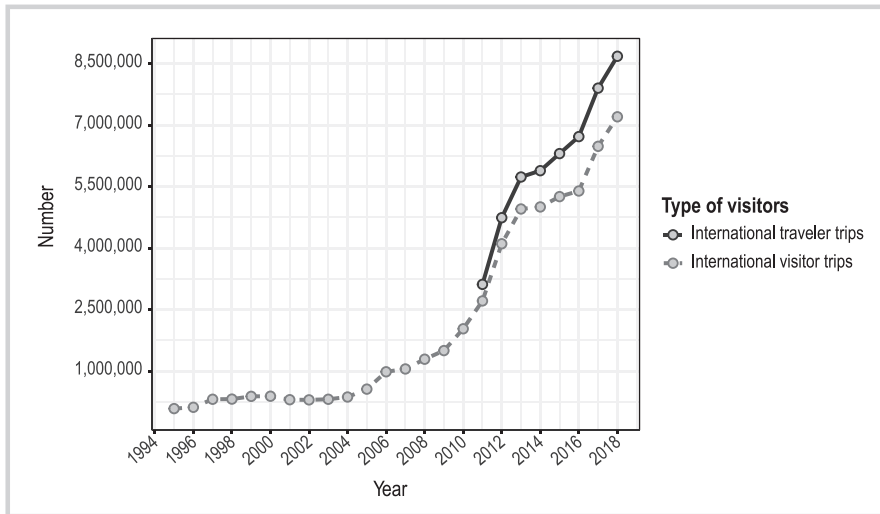
Culture and tourism have a synergistic relationship that can make a location more attractive and competitive on both regional and national levels. The demonstration of indigenous customs can be a means of sustaining traditions (Godde et al 2000; Besculides et al 2002; OECD 2009; Williams and Lew 2015). Conversely, tourism can be an agent for negative cultural change or loss of indigenous identity and values, as its growth leads to cultural commodification (Shepherd 2002; Macleod 2006; Mbaiwa 2011; Williams and Lew 2015). One dynamic in the midst of such cultural erosion and loss of authenticity is the tradition of hospitality and the guest–host relationship. Investigations from the perspective of the social sciences go beyond their commercialized basis and look at the depth of both human and social phenomena (Robinson and Smith 2006; Causevic and Lynch 2009).

The tradition of hospitality has received much attention in Caucasian studies (Curro 2017). In particular, anthropological and cultural studies have widely investigated the practices of welcoming guests in Georgia (Kotthoff 1995; Chatwin 1997; Dragadze 2003; Tuite 2005; Khutsishvili 2010; Ram 2014). Curro (2014) traced the history of the abovementioned studies and pointed out that paradigmatic expressions of hospitality, particularly the tradition of the

Georgian feast and the structure of toasts, have been defined as pillars of national identity. Furthermore, reverential attitudes toward guests, who are seen by hosts as “God-sent,” are part of centuries-long guest–host traditions. Historically, the primary responsibility of the host, who is called “the lord of house and feast,” is respectful hosting; this determines the dignity of the family. Even on a physical level, the elements of hospitality are integrated into Georgian secular architecture; the main room in the house is called a guest room.

The latest studies from mountainous regions of Georgia have highlighted the explicit economic transformations in local residents' livelihood strategies under rapidly increasing tourism (Figure 1). In recent years, communities have significantly benefited from involvement in a diverse range of tourism-related activities, such as establishing guesthouses, catering, and providing entertainment services (Gugushvili et al 2017; Hüller et al 2017; Khartishvili et al 2019). Some authors have outlined promising directions for further economic development, such as rural tourism, ecotourism, heritage tourism, and agritourism (Khoshtaria and Chachava 2017; Paresishvili et al 2017; Khartishvili et al 2019). The latter process inevitably directs particular interest toward the *current* manifestation of the guest–host relationship and hospitality, whereas both cultural elements were sacred in older times (Barisashvili 2015).

**FIGURE 1** Number of international travelers and visitors in Georgia (1995–2018). International travelers move between different geographic locations for any purpose and any duration. International visitors are travelers taking a trip to a main destination outside their usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure, or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited.



In terms of hospitality, research has mainly focused on investigations of Georgia's tradition of welcoming guests and its influence on society (Kotthoff 1995; Chatwin 1997; Khutsishvili 2010; Curro 2014; Ram 2014). Such an approach omits the recent transformation of Georgian hospitality under cultural commodification provoked by tourism development.

This study aimed to examine the conversion of long-standing practices of Georgian hospitality to tourism, and to discuss the results of this process. The primary objective was to reveal the commodification of the traditional guest-host relationship and its integration into guesthouse services. Ultimately, the paper examines whether or not traditional hospitality has been maintained in otherwise uniform tourism service provision.

## Methodology

### Research design

The study used the grounded theory approach, which was developed (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to uncover basic social processes by producing a data-driven theory and explanation (Junek and Killion 2012; Kenny and Fourie 2014). The first stage involved collecting data through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and digital data retrieved from booking.com. The study of online data was limited to information available in English, excluding guest reviews in other languages. The data were analyzed through a hybrid approach integrating several manual and automated techniques. Altogether, this approach helped significantly to overcome the weaknesses of each analytical method used, and it ensured delivery of quantity as well as quality, breadth, and depth of data and analysis (Franzosi 2010).

### Data collection

**Offline data collection:** Empirical data were collected in mountainous regions of Georgia in 2015 and 2018 (Figure 2). The selected study areas incorporate several similar characteristics, including their mountainous location, rapidly developing tourism, transitional economy, solidly

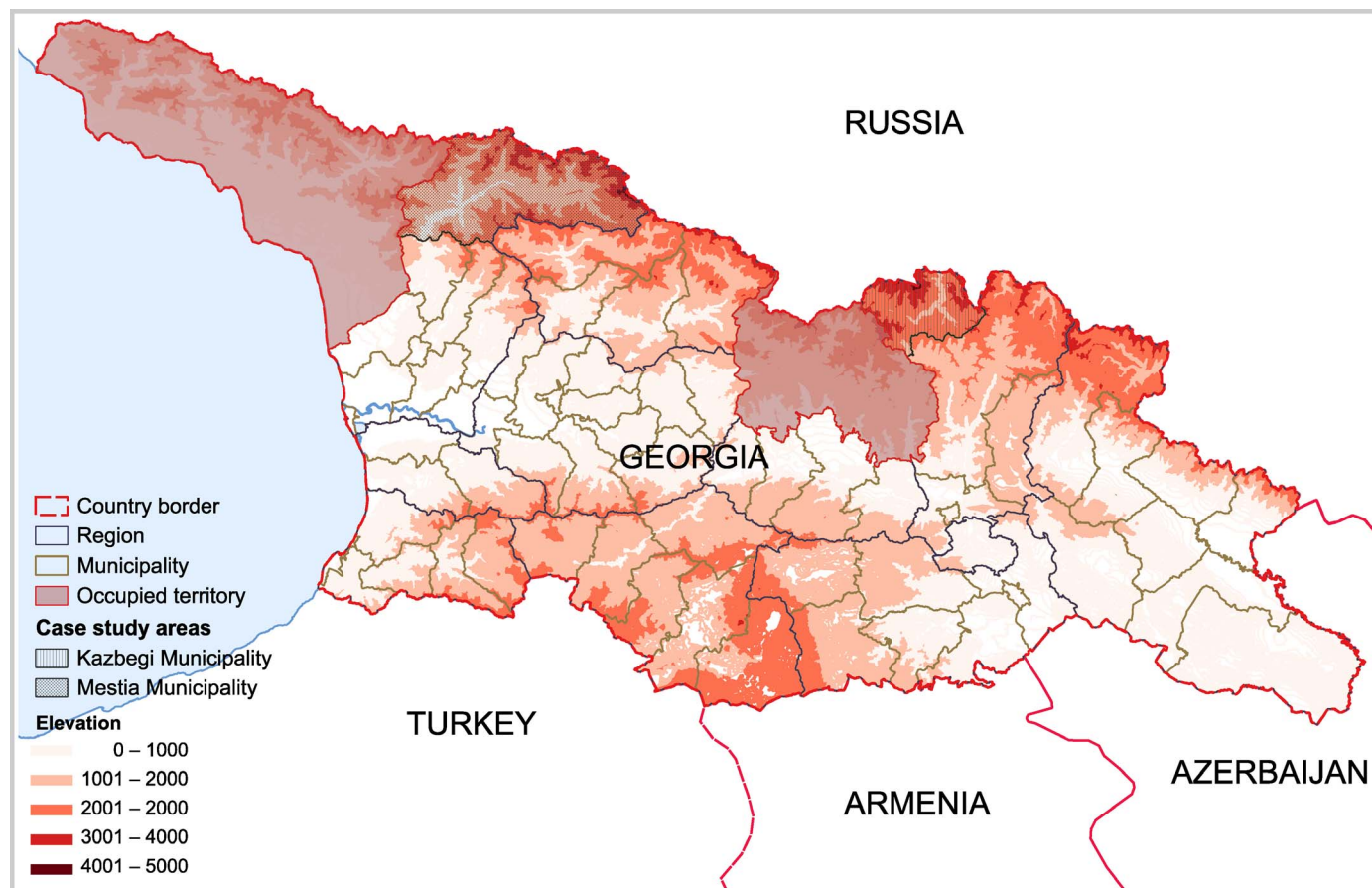
rooted cultural identity, regional authenticity, etc. The study findings could therefore be applicable to other similar regions.

Research began in 2015, with the first round of fieldwork being conducted in Kazbegi District (42°39'27"N; 44°38'43"E), in the region of Mtskheta-Mtianeti in northeastern Georgia. Its population is nearly 3800, according to GEOSTAT (2014). Through a purposive sampling method, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with tourism service providers (hotel/guesthouse and catering service owner/manager), and 10 interviews were conducted with visitors (stayed at hotel/guesthouse for at least 2 days). The participant observation method was used to collect information about the services provided by the guesthouse owners. All interviews with international tourists were conducted in English, whereas the service providers were interviewed in Georgian.

The second round of fieldwork was conducted in 2018 in Kazbegi and Mestia (43°2'44"N; 42°43'47"E) with the primary aim of studying the local tourism supply chain (Figure 3). Mestia District, in the Samegrelo–Upper Svaneti region, sits in the southern part of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range. In 2014, according to the census, approximately 15,000 people lived in Mestia. Guesthouse owners were selected by purposive sampling and surveyed using in-depth interview methods. Predefined traits were considered in selecting respondents, including geographic location, gender, and duration of tourism activity. Ultimately, 115 interviews were conducted in Mestia (15 communities) and Kazbegi (4 communities).

**Online data collection:** The increasing integration of technology into our lives has created a “mountain” of online data on relationships, interactions, and social practices of human beings. The increasing integration of digital technologies into the tourism industry has created unprecedented volumes of data on travel-related activities, including feedback on the services offered. In recent years, several researchers (Lazer et al 2009; Nardulli et al 2015; Nelson 2017) have used grounded theory approaches for

FIGURE 2 Mountainous study sites in the Greater Caucasus. (Map by Temur Gugushvili)



their studies of these massive amounts of unstructured social data available online.

A newly developed web-scraping tool was used to retrieve guest reviews of accommodation units located in the study areas from booking.com. These reviews covered the period from 2 January 2015 to 26 November 2018. The database of retrieved reviews contained 22,405 visitor reviews of 330 hotels and hotel-type establishments in the form of textual and structural data, such as the location of the accommodation unit, the year of the review, and the country of origin of the visitor.

### Data processing and analysis

The first phase of data processing and analysis used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis approach. This approach guaranteed the successful implementation of fully manual category building, employing principles of thematic analysis (Kuckartz 2014). Inferences from the narratives of guesthouse visitors and fieldwork notes led to the exploration of opinions about tourism service delivery practices in the selected regions. The first round (2015) of fieldwork produced many notes referring to the existence of value-added, informal services in the accommodation units. The information obtained during the thematic coding showed that “uncommodified services” was an important category.

After precedents were set without any pre-intention, the topic was raised again by the respondents during the second round (2018) of fieldwork. The same principles were applied

for the second phase of the qualitative data analysis. As a result of manual coding, in addition to the existing thematic category/code of “informal services in guesthouses,” 2 more major codes (and several subcodes) emerged in the analysis: “tradition-based experience” and “family-operated guesthouses.” Every transcribed interview conducted with a guesthouse owner was coded using these categories. Each code was established according to the narratives that emerged through the interviews. Such a methodological approach unexpectedly revealed a thus-far hidden phenomenon: the intersection between Georgian guest–host tradition and service delivery at guesthouses.

The next phase of the analysis added quantitative characteristics using dictionary-based quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). At the initial stage, a primary dictionary was developed for this particular study, combining narratives from both fieldwork and participant observation notes. The process was circular (Figure 4), applying various tools, including the keyword in contexts (MAXQDA 2020) and word clouds, followed by a close reading of the autocoded reviews, which enriched the existing dictionary with new words, synonyms, and lemmatization. This generated an updated dictionary for the next autocoding process. The circular process was carried out multiple times to form the best categories to detect all representations of the augmented part of the services in the tourists’ reviews. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2017), product and services are outlined as a group of 3 levels of fundamental elements (core, actual, and augmented



**FIGURE 3** (A) Interior of the Guesthouse in Stepantsiminda, Kazbegi (photo by Dea Abakelia); (B) landscape of the Mestia municipality (photo by Temur Gugushvili)



products). The core product is the most basic level that the consumer is really seeking to buy. The actual product is the good/service offered to the consumer with specific characteristics, a design, a brand name, and packaging. Importantly, this study focused on the augmented product, which represents the additional benefits (friendliness, helpfulness, general atmosphere, and image) that a consumer receives in obtaining the product (McGrath 1999; Salamoura and Angelis 2008).

## Results

### Informal services in guesthouses

*Free extra services:* Based on the narratives from Kazbegi, tourists emphasized the advantages of staying at the guesthouses. Most of them highlighted that the owners offered extra help when it was needed and that they received this help free of charge. Although their needs were not the direct responsibility of the host, the host willingly provided free assistance.

In this regard, fieldwork notes played a vital role and provided detailed information on free extra services willingly offered by hosts—guide hiring, horse rental, tour management, private car/taxi rental services, etc. Furthermore, the guesthouse owners were also ready to direct tourists to other relevant persons.

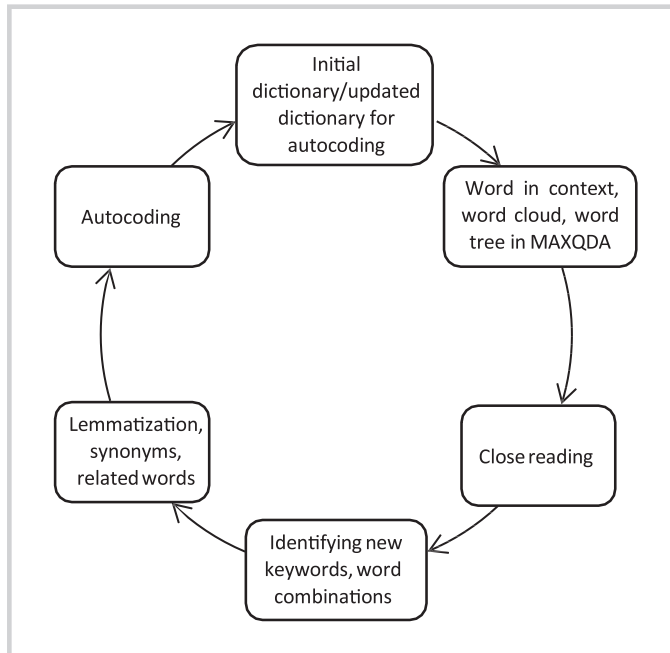
*Oh, yes, it is very nice. Here people are kind, respect you, and if you need any support, they will help you. Information, food, anything, they will help you.*

*(Guesthouse visitor, male, Asia, 2015)*

During the second round of fieldwork, the same tendency to provide extra services at no cost was observed. In this particular case, due to the high number of respondents, the context of this subject was revealed in a much more diverse way. In addition to offering services free of charge or connecting tourists with other service providers, in some cases the hosts willingly integrated the activities the tourists required.

Notably, the guesthouse owners also involved the tourists in preparing local traditional dishes and in daily activities.

FIGURE 4 The process of developing the dictionary for autocoding.



*Everything is interesting for them—they are willing to see how we prepare food and they are interested in trying. For instance, they asked me to teach them how to milk a cow.*  
(Guesthouse owner, Kazbegi, 2018)

As the tourists highlighted, these experiences were also free of charge. Hence, free extra services enrich the core and actual services in the guesthouses with additional traits representing the third, augmented product level. In some narratives, it was clear that the willingness to provide free services for tourists was determined by the hosts' sense of dignity and mindset.

*If they have a cup of coffee, whether helshel is a foreigner or not, [I won't disgrace myself] to get a fee for it. It's unacceptable to me to do it especially [in presence of] the children.*  
(Guesthouse owner, Mestia, 2018)

Based on the online data analysis, various forms of free extra services were identified in 439 reviews from a total of 52% of the guesthouses (Table 1).

**Homely atmosphere:** Tourists, based on the narratives, often expressed an impression that guesthouse owners hosted

them as personal guests or family acquaintances rather than clients. Moreover, respondents highlighted that they established informal relationships with the hosts. An equally important element is that they referred to the provision of exceptional care at the guesthouses. All of these experiences are examples of augmented products and are described through the following phrases: “I see families here”; “she was acting like a grandmother”; “asked us to come as guests [friends] not guesthouse visitors”; etc.

Based on the informants, such a family atmosphere shaped the informal relationship itself, which goes beyond the customer–service-provider connection and forms a guest–host type of relationship.

*She was really hospitable and was feeding us like her grandchildren. I felt like she was my grandmother, although it was a bit too much.*  
(Guesthouse visitor, female, Europe, Kazbegi, 2015)

*There are incredible relationships, yes. Those who were staying here, last summer, sent us a package [gifts] for New Year's Eve.*  
(Guesthouse owner, Mestia, 2018)

In addition to fieldwork information, online data were also analyzed. To assess the prevalence of the homely atmosphere in the study regions based on the online reviews of tourists on booking.com, 2 major categories were used for autocoding: “hospitality” (lemmatizations: hospitable, hospitalities) and “feeling at home.” “Feeling at home” (265 reviews) and “hospitality” (924 reviews) were found in numerous reviews on guesthouses (73% of total guesthouses) (Table 1).

This supports the observation that the tourists staying at guesthouses experience a homely ambiance, which they considered intrinsically comfortable.

*Great hosts immediately made me feel at home... they offered me tea and helped me with planning my day. They are helpful but give you enough privacy to enjoy your stay as well.*  
(Guesthouse visitor, female, Europe, Kazbegi, 2018)

*They welcomed us and went out of their way to help us with several problems we had during our stay. We felt like home.*  
(Guesthouse visitor, male, Europe, Mestia, 2018)

**Tradition-based experience**

Throughout the narratives collected during the second round of fieldwork, we observed that the guesthouse owners had accumulated years of experience in hosting before

TABLE 1 Primary results of the online data analysis.

Phenomenon/ family code	Dictionary/subcodes	Guesthouses with reviews (%)	Documents/ reviews (%)	Total documents/ reviews
Extra services	Care; caring; for free; they helped; helping; gave/give us; willing to help; cares; useful information; cared; they help; gave us a lot; give/gave us a ride; gave us a lift; help you for; offered their help	52	1.99	439
Feeling at home	At home; like home; homely; family atmosphere; warm atmosphere; authentic atmosphere; homelike	37.27	1.20	265
Hospitality	Hospitable; hospitalities	68.48	4.37	924
Family-run guesthouse	Family-run; ran; running; runs	22.42	0.50	105

establishing the guesthouses. Hosting guests was nothing new, and it did not present a challenge for them. They used the traditional knowledge they possessed. In addition, some respondents had previous experience of hosting foreign guests. Their accumulated experience and skills paid off in the current tourism environment, when they officially became owners of guesthouses. However, it is noteworthy that unique and authentic services for guests were created founded on their tradition-based experiences. This constitutes local cultural identities that are typical of this particular place.

*We had so many guests, from my childhood... every time we are hosting.*

*(Guesthouse owner, Mestia, 2018)*

Apart from the general experience in service delivery, the study indicated that the hosts were also seasoned in the preparation of local dishes. As the provision of local traditional dishes was one of the vital aspects of service delivery for tourists, the hosts tried to meet this demand and offer diverse, high-quality local cuisine.

*We never lack guests... I am "boiled" with the experience of hosting.*

*(Guesthouse owner, Kazbegi, 2018)*

### Family-run guesthouse

The results indicated that guesthouses are mainly established and operated by families. The hosts usually live in the same building or nearby on the same premises. Roles are divided among members of the family. In this way, family members also contribute to the functioning of the accommodation unit when hosting tourists. Maintenance of the family structure creates a homely atmosphere.

*Almost every family member is involved. My wife is housekeeper... My son and I are suppliers of products, I do what I can.*

*(Guesthouse owner, Mestia, 2018)*

Importantly, gendered aspects that determine the division of labor and functions in a family are applied in similar forms in the functioning of the guesthouse. In particular, women are mostly occupied in cooking food, cleaning rooms, and similar activities, whereas men are involved in the supply of products, construction, and repair work.

To explore whether tourists perceive that it is important for family members to run guesthouses together and whether they gain additional experience from this, we analyzed the online data retrieved from booking.com. Two main keywords, "family" and "run" (lemmatizations: ran, running, runs), were used for autocoding the reviews. The frequency of the code "family" was 1062, and the frequency of the code "run" was 264. After autocoding the co-occurrence of both codes, the Code Relations Browser tool was used to examine the reviews. According to the analyzed online reviews, tourists indicated in 105 comments (22% of the guesthouses) that they stayed at family-run guesthouses (Table 1). Analysis of full sentences showed that tourists were very pleased that they did not feel like travelers, but like family guests.

*In this small guesthouse, I really felt at home. The family that manages [the place] is special.*

*(Guesthouse visitor, female, Europe, Kazbegi, 2017)*

## Discussion

In 1996, the World Commission on Culture and Development raised the remarkable question, "Don't we possess the tradition, imagination, intellectual and organizational reserves to elaborate our own models of development?" (WCCD, 1996) This article introduces the results of a case study in the mountainous region of Georgia, providing examples of this possessed tradition. The study extends our knowledge of current practices of guesthouses and points to the results of using tradition-based experiences to give tourists a unique experience and benefit from the advantages of augmented tourist products (Middleton and Clarke 2001; Kotler and Armstrong 2017).

The interlinkages and influences between culture and tourism are frequently debated in the literature (Robinson and Smith 2006). While tourism has been blamed for contributing to the commodification of cultures, destroying the authenticity of local products, and leading to "staged" or "faked" experiences (Shepherd 2002; Williams and Lew 2015), contrary to expectations, we found a very different reality. Surprisingly, we observed the coexistence of uncommodified parts of traditional components with commodified ones. Although our results differ from those of Shepherd (2002) and Williams and Lew (2015), it can nevertheless be argued that the dominance of the tourism industry leads to major transformations in several parts of people's lives. The sustainability of this process should be monitored.

The value of cultural identity in sustainable development processes is considered key to the long-term stability and wellbeing of a community (Cucina 2015). Hence, the high importance of a synergistic relationship between tourism and culture for the intensification of a destination's attractiveness and competitiveness is observed (OECD 2009; Williams and Lew 2015). Furthermore, the loss of the identity of a destination is among the main concerns when striving for the sustainable development of local communities; cultural identity should be acknowledged as an authentic resource and development incentive (Gražulevičiūtė 2006). This paper highlights that positive interaction between tourism and local culture provides unique services and contributes to sustainability. The study confirms the crucial importance of maintaining local products and traditional cuisine in tourism (Gugushvili et al 2017; Khartishvili et al 2019). This helps tourism to be sustainable and inclusive, in the sense of involving indigenous people. Importantly, based on our study, we anticipate that the uncommercialized hospitable behavior will be maintained in Georgia's near future. For long-term viability, Georgian hospitality as an attractive factor giving a competitive advantage to a destination will be a necessity.

## Conclusion

The study revealed the existence of free extra services provided by the guesthouse owners to tourists. The provision of such services is a result of the owners' traditional understanding of hospitality, considering such behavior as a matter of self-esteem and prestige for their families and communities. Their relationship with tourists is not fully framed within commercialized behavior, and it is more similar to interactions with family guests, with



whom hosts want to leave a good impression and a sense of respect.

The study shows that family members operate and manage guesthouses together; roles are allotted in advance and partially replicate patterns of labor distribution inside families. The results of the study support the idea that this creates a family environment that is filled with hospitality and informal relationships, similar to the reality of a typical Georgian family.

Currently, the tradition-based experience itself has led to the creation of authentic services for tourists in guesthouses. Since guesthouse owners' experience is strongly rooted in communal and personal traditions, traditional local cultural aspects are reflected in tourist service delivery. Development of this process contributes to the conservation of local culture and to overall sustainable development.

Taken together, the abovementioned transformations, and the consequences of these changes on uncommodified culture, have become an augmented part of the service delivery. Results are promising, as tourists see this as positive, creating a unique experience during their stay. This competitive advantage of the mountainous destinations creates extra socioeconomic benefits (eg loyal visitors) while retaining the long-standing cultural identity of the host community.

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