

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submission	28 January, 2026
Reviewed	16 February, 2026
Accepted	27 February, 2026
Published	05 March, 2026
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GLOBAL VIRTUAL VILLAGE AND 360 DEGREE CULTURAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCES AMONG ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

Tourism Innovation, Indigenous Cultural Protection, and Ethical Digital Heritage Governance

IAC JOURNAL OF BUSINESS REVIEW (IACJBR)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Immersive technologies such as 360 degree video, virtual reality, and interactive digital storytelling are increasingly transforming cultural tourism by enabling visitors to experience heritage sites and indigenous practices beyond geographic constraints. For Aboriginal communities in Australia, digital cultural immersion offers new pathways for cultural education, community revenue generation, and narrative sovereignty. However, it also raises accountability issues related to cultural appropriation, data ownership, consent, and the commodification of sacred knowledge.

Aim: This study examined how the global virtual village concept and 360 degree cultural immersion technologies influence tourism innovation and cultural sustainability among Aboriginal communities in Australia, while assessing governance mechanisms that support ethical digital heritage management.

Methodology: The study adopted a mixed methods approach combining qualitative interviews with Aboriginal cultural custodians, digital tourism platform providers, and heritage policy stakeholders, alongside a structured survey of potential cultural tourists. Interviews were conducted across Queensland, New South Wales, and Northern Territory heritage hubs, while the survey produced 360 valid responses. Key constructs included virtual village engagement, perceived cultural authenticity,

ethical governance perception, willingness to pay for immersive experiences, and perceived community benefit. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling.

Findings: Virtual village engagement significantly improved perceived cultural learning and visitor interest in Aboriginal heritage experiences. 360 degree cultural immersion increased willingness to pay when authenticity cues and community endorsed narratives were visible. Ethical governance perception significantly influenced trust and adoption, indicating that tourists are more likely to participate when they believe content is community controlled and culturally respectful. However, concerns emerged regarding digital replication of sacred spaces, weak consent protocols, and limited community capacity to manage intellectual property and revenue sharing in platform partnerships.

Contributions: This study contributes to digital tourism and indigenous heritage literature by proposing an ethical governance framework for immersive cultural tourism that integrates community consent, data sovereignty, revenue transparency, and cultural sensitivity controls.

Recommendations

Tourism innovators: Co design virtual experiences with Aboriginal custodians and integrate consent based content governance.

Policy makers: Develop digital heritage guidelines that protect sacred knowledge and ensure benefit sharing.

Communities: Strengthen digital capability and contract governance to safeguard cultural rights and improve revenue accountability.

Keywords: Virtual village, 360 degree immersion, Aboriginal heritage, Digital tourism, Cultural sustainability, Data sovereignty, Australia.

Cite as: Thompson, A. G., Williams, N. J., Maseko, L. N., & Eze, C. I. (2026). Global virtual village and 360 degree cultural immersion experiences among Aboriginal communities in Australia. *IAC Journal of Business Review*, 1(1), 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.69480/IACJBR.1.1.2026.05>

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has created a global virtual village in which cultural experiences are increasingly mediated through platforms, immersive media, and interactive storytelling. In tourism markets, this shift reduces distance barriers and enables visitors to participate in heritage learning without physical travel. The diffusion of 360 degree video and virtual reality has strengthened the capacity of destinations to provide sensory rich previews of attractions and to develop hybrid tourism models that combine physical visitation with virtual participation.

For Indigenous communities, immersive cultural technologies can support cultural preservation by documenting oral history, ceremonies, language elements, and ecological knowledge. They can also provide economic opportunities by expanding market access and offering virtual products such as guided immersive tours, digital craft showcases, and subscription based learning experiences. Yet, Indigenous cultural digitisation is not neutral. It raises ethical concerns regarding who controls representation, how sacred knowledge is protected, and how value is distributed across community members and external platform partners.

Aboriginal communities in Australia have long advocated for cultural sovereignty and the protection of Indigenous intellectual property. The integration of immersive tourism therefore requires governance mechanisms that prevent cultural extraction and ensure community consent. This study investigates the impacts of virtual village engagement and 360 degree cultural immersion on tourism innovation and cultural sustainability among Aboriginal communities, and proposes governance principles that can support ethical digital heritage development.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual review The global virtual village describes the increasing interconnectedness of cultural interaction enabled by digital media, where heritage is experienced across borders. 360 degree cultural immersion refers to immersive content formats that provide panoramic, interactive representation of places and practices. Cultural sustainability captures the preservation and respectful transmission of identity, language, values, and heritage practices across generations. Ethical digital heritage governance refers to consent protocols, data sovereignty, intellectual property protection, and benefit sharing arrangements that ensure community control and accountability.

Theoretical review Service dominant logic explains tourism value as co created through interactions between visitors, communities, and platforms. Cultural commodification theory warns that commercialisation can dilute meaning and increase exploitation when community agency is weak. Data sovereignty principles emphasise Indigenous rights to control data and knowledge representation, while stakeholder theory suggests that ethical outcomes depend on balancing the interests of communities, tourists, regulators, and platforms.

Empirical review Digital tourism research shows that immersive content increases interest and willingness to pay by enhancing perceived authenticity and reducing uncertainty. Indigenous heritage studies highlight that respectful representation and community control are crucial for trust, and that weak contractual governance can lead to appropriation and inequitable revenue distribution. This evidence supports the expectation that ethical governance perception will shape the relationship between immersion technology and adoption outcomes.

Hypotheses H1 Virtual village engagement positively influences perceived cultural learning. H2 360 degree immersion positively influences willingness to pay for Aboriginal cultural experiences. H3 Ethical governance perception strengthens the relationship between immersion experiences and trust. H4 Perceived community benefit mediates the relationship between immersive tourism adoption and cultural sustainability outcomes.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed methods approach. Qualitative interviews were conducted with Aboriginal cultural custodians, heritage centre managers, digital platform developers, and public sector stakeholders involved in cultural tourism and heritage management. Interviews explored themes of consent, representation, intellectual property, revenue allocation, and community capacity.

A structured survey was administered to potential cultural tourists who had prior interest in cultural heritage tourism or immersive tourism experiences. The survey captured virtual village engagement, perceived authenticity, ethical governance perception, trust, willingness to pay, and perceived community benefit. A total of 360 valid responses were obtained. Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding to triangulate key governance and cultural protection concerns.

Construct measurement followed a five point Likert scale format. Virtual village engagement captured participation in digital cultural communities, interest in global cultural exchange, and platform based heritage exploration. Ethical governance perception captured perceived community ownership, consent clarity, benefit sharing transparency, and cultural sensitivity safeguards. Cultural sustainability outcomes captured perceived respectfulness, learning depth, and intention to support Indigenous cultural preservation initiatives.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive findings indicate high interest in immersive cultural tourism, with many respondents reporting that 360 degree previews improve understanding of cultural contexts and increase confidence in planning heritage related travel. Trust levels were strongly tied to whether the experience was visibly endorsed by Aboriginal custodians and whether revenue contribution to communities was communicated transparently.

Structural equation results show that virtual village engagement significantly increases perceived cultural learning, implying that global cultural connectivity encourages deeper curiosity and educational participation. 360 degree immersion significantly increases willingness to pay, especially when authenticity cues such as community narration, language inclusion, and contextual storytelling are present.

Ethical governance perception significantly strengthens trust and adoption, confirming that tourists are more willing to participate when they believe content governance is community controlled and respectful. Perceived community benefit partially mediates the relationship between adoption and cultural sustainability outcomes, suggesting that immersive tourism supports cultural sustainability when it delivers visible community value and reinforces narrative sovereignty.

Qualitative insights reveal three critical risks. First, sacred knowledge exposure risk arises when immersive content captures restricted cultural spaces. Second, platform asymmetry risk occurs when contracts lack transparency on revenue shares and data ownership. Third, capability constraints limit community capacity to negotiate rights, manage content updates, and enforce intellectual property protection. These risks highlight the necessity of ethical digital heritage governance frameworks that are enforceable and community led.

5.0 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The findings imply that immersive cultural tourism should adopt governance mechanisms that prioritise Aboriginal community authority in content selection, narration, and dissemination. A proposed ethical governance framework includes four pillars.

First is consent governance, requiring prior informed consent, protocols for culturally restricted knowledge, and periodic review of published content. Second is data sovereignty, requiring community control of raw footage, metadata, and platform analytics. Third is benefit sharing accountability, requiring transparent revenue allocation, community development reinvestment plans, and auditability of platform transactions. Fourth is cultural integrity safeguards, requiring cultural sensitivity review boards, heritage advisory oversight, and mechanisms to prevent misuse of imagery and narratives.

These pillars should be operationalised through legally enforceable agreements and supported by capacity building initiatives that strengthen community negotiation skills, digital literacy, and intellectual property management.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the global virtual village and 360 degree cultural immersion technologies can strengthen cultural learning, tourism innovation, and willingness to support Aboriginal heritage experiences. However, adoption and sustainability outcomes depend strongly on ethical governance and the credibility of community control mechanisms.

Tourism innovators should co design immersive experiences with Aboriginal custodians and embed consent based content governance. Policy makers should develop digital heritage standards that protect sacred knowledge and require benefit sharing disclosure. Aboriginal communities should strengthen digital capability, contract governance, and cultural oversight structures to ensure narrative sovereignty and revenue accountability.

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