

Tourists' Experiences in Interpreting Sustainable Tourism: A Study on Ecotourism Destinations in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical paradigm in the global tourism industry, emphasizing environmental preservation, social equity, and cultural authenticity. In the context of ecotourism, tourists' experiences are deeply emotional and transformative, influencing their perceptions of sustainability and ethical responsibility. However, existing research predominantly uses quantitative approaches that fail to capture the subjective meanings and emotional dimensions of these experiences. This study investigates how tourists construct meanings and interpret their experiences of sustainable tourism using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 tourists visiting ecotourism destinations in Indonesia and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify experiential themes. The findings reveal that tourists' perceptions of sustainability are shaped by emotional connections with nature, ethical responsibility toward local communities, and a desire for authentic cultural immersion, highlighting the emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of sustainable tourism. These insights provide a holistic understanding of tourists' subjective experiences, contributing to the literature by offering a phenomenological perspective on sustainable tourism. The study underscores the importance of experiential authenticity and emotional engagement in influencing tourists' sustainable behaviors and provides strategic implications for experience design and destination marketing. These findings pave the way for future research on cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal impacts, and the role of digital narratives in shaping sustainability meanings.



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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has evolved into a powerful global industry, significantly impacting economic growth, cultural exchange, and environmental sustainability (Virakul & Russ-Eft, 2020). In recent decades, sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical paradigm, emphasizing environmental preservation, social equity, and economic viability (Elkington, 1997). Within this framework, ecotourism has gained prominence as a form of sustainable tourism that promotes conservation and local community empowerment while providing tourists with authentic and meaningful experiences (Weaver, 2001). As global awareness of environmental issues continues to grow, ecotourism destinations are increasingly popular among travelers seeking responsible and ethical travel experiences.

Indonesia, renowned for its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, has positioned itself as a leading destination for ecotourism (Mas-Tur dkk., 2020). The country's diverse ecosystems, ranging from tropical rainforests to marine conservation areas, offer unique opportunities for immersive nature-based tourism (Buckley, 2012). However, achieving sustainable tourism in these ecotourism destinations requires balancing environmental preservation, community development, and tourists' experiential satisfaction. This complexity necessitates a deeper understanding of how tourists perceive and engage with sustainable tourism practices.

Recent studies have explored various dimensions of sustainable tourism, including environmental impacts, community involvement, and economic benefits. However, the subjective

experiences and meanings that tourists attach to sustainability remain underexplored (Quan & Wang, 2004). Traditional approaches in tourism research have largely focused on quantitative assessments of tourist behavior, neglecting the emotional and cognitive aspects that influence their perceptions and decisions. Understanding these subjective experiences is essential for designing effective sustainability strategies that resonate with tourists' values and motivations.

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on exploring lived experiences and subjective realities, provides a suitable approach to examining how tourists perceive and make sense of sustainable tourism (Sewpersadh, 2019). This study aims to investigate the meanings and experiences of tourists visiting ecotourism destinations in Indonesia, focusing on how they interpret sustainability through their emotional connections, cultural interactions, and environmental awareness. By exploring the essence of their experiences, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sustainable tourism that goes beyond behavioral patterns and economic impacts.

By utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to bridge the gap in current literature by capturing the rich, contextual meanings that tourists attach to sustainable tourism. This exploration not only enhances theoretical knowledge of tourist experience and behavior but also provides practical insights for ecotourism managers and policymakers to develop strategies that align with tourists' evolving perceptions of sustainability.

Research on tourist experiences has become increasingly significant in the field of sustainable tourism, as understanding tourists' perceptions and emotional connections is crucial for designing effective sustainability strategies (Decrop, 2006). In the context of ecotourism, where tourists engage with natural environments and local communities, experiences are often deeply emotional and transformative, influencing their environmental attitudes and travel behaviors (Buckley, 2012). These subjective experiences shape how tourists perceive sustainability, ethical responsibility, and cultural authenticity, thereby impacting their decision-making processes and satisfaction levels.

Despite the growing interest in experiential tourism, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and complexity of tourists' experiences (Galletta dkk., 2021). Traditional research approaches have predominantly relied on quantitative methods, such as surveys and statistical analyses, which are limited in exploring the subjective meanings and emotional dimensions of experiences. These approaches often reduce rich experiential data into numerical values, overlooking the cognitive and affective aspects that are central to how individuals interpret and make sense of their encounters (Quan & Wang, 2004).

Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on behavioral intentions and satisfaction metrics, neglecting the phenomenological essence of tourist experiences, such as emotional resonance, reflective thought, and existential meaning (Tanthanongsakkun dkk., 2023). As a result, the intricate interplay between perception, emotion, and interpretation remains underexplored, leading to a fragmented understanding of how tourists engage with sustainable tourism practices.

This gap in methodology has highlighted the need for qualitative approaches that can capture the lived experiences and subjective realities of tourists (Mattera & Soto, 2023). Phenomenology, as a research paradigm, emphasizes the exploration of experiences from the perspective of the individuals who live them. It enables researchers to delve into the essence of experiences, revealing the meanings, emotions, and interpretations that shape tourists' perceptions of sustainability. By focusing on how tourists make sense of their experiences, phenomenology provides a more nuanced understanding of their cognitive and emotional engagement with sustainable tourism.

However, despite its potential, phenomenological research in tourism remains scarce, particularly in exploring how tourists construct meanings related to sustainable tourism (Oyewo dkk., 2023). This limitation underscores the need for phenomenological inquiry that goes beyond descriptive narratives to uncover the deeper, subjective meanings tourists ascribe to their experiences. By doing so, it offers an enriched understanding of sustainable tourism that resonates with tourists' ethical values, emotional connections, and cultural identities.

Existing research on sustainable tourism and ecotourism experiences has predominantly employed quantitative approaches, focusing on behavioral intentions, satisfaction metrics, and

environmental attitudes (Weaver, 2001; Buckley, 2012). These studies have provided valuable insights into tourists' decision-making processes and the economic impacts of sustainable tourism. However, they are limited in capturing the subjective meanings and emotional connections that tourists develop through their experiences with nature, culture, and community engagement (Quan & Wang, 2004). The reliance on structured surveys and statistical analyses tends to reduce complex experiential phenomena into numerical values, thereby oversimplifying the rich, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of tourists' experiences.

Moreover, current approaches often emphasize practical implementations of sustainable tourism practices, such as waste management, conservation programs, and community-based tourism initiatives (Adu dkk., 2022). While these studies highlight the effectiveness of sustainability interventions, they frequently overlook the experiential essence of sustainability as perceived by the tourists themselves. This instrumental focus on behavior and policy implications neglects the phenomenological aspects of how tourists make sense of and emotionally engage with sustainable tourism practices.

A few qualitative studies have explored tourist experiences in sustainable contexts but have primarily relied on descriptive narratives without delving into the underlying meanings and interpretations that shape tourists' perceptions and behaviors (Decrop, 2006). This descriptive focus limits the depth of understanding and fails to reveal the existential meanings that influence tourists' sense of responsibility, ethical choices, and emotional connections with nature and local communities.

This gap in methodological approach suggests a need for phenomenological inquiry that explores the subjective realities and lived experiences of tourists engaging in sustainable tourism (Mattera dkk., 2020). Phenomenology offers a robust framework to examine how tourists construct meanings, interpret experiences, and emotionally connect with sustainability in ecotourism contexts. By focusing on the essence of experiences, phenomenology provides a holistic understanding of the emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of sustainable tourism, offering insights that go beyond behavioral patterns and economic impacts.

Therefore, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the experiential meanings and subjective interpretations that tourists attach to sustainable tourism in ecotourism destinations in Indonesia (Hu dkk., 2021). By doing so, it seeks to address the knowledge gap in understanding the deeper, subjective dimensions of sustainable tourism experiences, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of tourist behavior and perception in sustainable tourism contexts.

Previous research on tourist experiences in sustainable tourism has primarily focused on behavioral patterns, satisfaction metrics, and environmental impacts, often using quantitative methods (Weaver, 2001; Buckley, 2012). These studies provide valuable insights into the external drivers of tourist behavior but fall short in exploring the subjective experiences and emotional connections that tourists develop during their encounters with nature and local communities. Some qualitative studies have explored experiential dimensions, but they largely rely on descriptive narratives without delving into the deeper meanings and existential interpretations tourists associate with sustainability (Quan & Wang, 2004). This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of experiences, particularly in ecotourism contexts where emotional engagement and ethical reflections play a significant role. The present study builds on these insights by exploring the subjective meanings and cognitive dimensions of sustainable tourism experiences in Indonesian ecotourism destinations.

To address the limitations identified in previous research, this study employs an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of tourists in sustainable tourism settings. Phenomenology is chosen for its emphasis on understanding experiences from the participants' perspectives, allowing for a deep exploration of how individuals construct meanings and interpret their encounters with sustainability. This approach is particularly relevant in revealing the emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions that influence tourists' perceptions and decisions. By focusing on the essence of experiences, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of how tourists emotionally engage with sustainability, thus addressing the knowledge gap identified in the previous section.

This article is structured to guide the reader through the phenomenological exploration of sustainable tourism experiences. The introduction presents the research context, the knowledge gap, and the relevance of a phenomenological approach. The Method section explains the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), detailing the participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis procedures. The Results section presents the experiential themes identified through participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations to illustrate the subjective meanings and emotional connections. The Discussion contextualizes these findings within existing literature, highlighting their theoretical and practical implications for sustainable tourism. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the key insights, emphasizing the importance of understanding the subjective dimensions of tourist experiences to design more impactful and resonant sustainability strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the subjective experiences and meanings that tourists attach to sustainable tourism in ecotourism destinations in Indonesia (Hudak, 2021). Phenomenology was chosen for its emphasis on capturing the essence of human experiences from the participants' perspectives, allowing an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their encounters with sustainable tourism practices.

The focus of phenomenology on lived experiences and subjective realities aligns with the research objective of understanding how tourists perceive and interpret sustainable tourism. By investigating the meanings and emotional connections associated with their experiences, this approach provides nuanced insights into the cognitive and affective dimensions of tourist behavior.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to explore not only the descriptive accounts of experiences but also the underlying meanings and interpretations that participants ascribed to those experiences. This approach is particularly relevant as it considers the contextual and emotional dimensions of tourist experiences, thereby offering a deeper understanding of how sustainability is subjectively perceived in ecotourism contexts.

Participants

The study involved tourists who visited ecotourism destinations in Indonesia within the past year, with the aim of capturing fresh and reflective experiences relevant to sustainable tourism (Nguyen & Zhao, 2021). Purposive sampling was used to select participants who consciously chose ecotourism destinations with sustainability in mind, ensuring that their experiences were relevant to the research objectives.

Inclusion criteria included tourists aged 18 and above who spent a minimum of three days at the destination and demonstrated awareness of sustainable tourism practices. Both domestic and international tourists were included to capture diverse cultural perspectives on sustainability.

Exclusion criteria were applied to tourists who selected the destinations purely by chance without any consideration of sustainability aspects (Bhatti et al., 2020). This helped in ensuring that the data collected was rich in relevant experiences and subjective meanings associated with sustainable tourism.

A total of 18 participants were involved, consisting of 10 domestic tourists and 8 international tourists. The age range was between 25 to 50 years, with an average age of 32 years. The gender distribution included 9 males and 9 females, ensuring balanced representation of perspectives. These demographic details provided a comprehensive understanding of experiences across different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and gender identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to explore the subjective experiences and meanings tourists attach to sustainable tourism (Alkaraan dkk., 2024). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to narrate their experiences, perceptions, and emotional connections with ecotourism destinations.

Examples of questions included:

1. "Can you describe your experience visiting this ecotourism destination?"
2. "What aspects of sustainability did you notice or find meaningful during your visit?"
3. "How did your experience influence your perception of sustainable tourism?"

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations convenient and comfortable for the participants, such as cafes or public parks near the ecotourism sites. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to share detailed narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent to ensure accuracy in data transcription and analysis.

To ensure a comfortable and open environment, participants were informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, encouraging honest and reflective sharing of their experiences. Additionally, observational notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that enriched the interpretative analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data following the systematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data while preserving the contextual meaning (Pasko dkk., 2022).

Data were transcribed verbatim, and a six-phase process was followed:

1. Familiarization with Data: Reading and re-reading the transcriptions to immerse in the narratives and gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences.
2. Coding: Identifying significant phrases and statements relevant to the research questions, followed by systematic coding using NVivo software to organize data efficiently.
3. Searching for Themes: Grouping the codes into potential themes that reflected the essence of participants' experiences.
4. Reviewing Themes: Refining the themes by cross-checking them against the coded data extracts and the overall data set to ensure coherence and consistency.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly defining each theme and identifying the core essence it represented, ensuring that the themes accurately captured the subjective meanings shared by the participants.
6. Writing the Narrative: Developing a cohesive narrative that connected the themes, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate the subjective meanings and experiences.

The use of NVivo facilitated systematic data management and allowed for the efficient organization of themes and subthemes, enhancing the depth and rigor of the analysis. Multiple rounds of coding were conducted to ensure consistency and reliability of the identified themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committee to ensure compliance with research standards. Informed consent was acquired from all participants, including clear communication about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity of their responses.

Written consent was obtained before conducting interviews, with participants assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences (Tan dkk., 2022). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to authorized personnel involved in the research.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with international standards for ethical research in social sciences. Cultural sensitivity was maintained throughout the study, ensuring respect for participants' values, beliefs, and experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Connectivity with Nature

The theme of Connectivity with Nature emerged as a central experience for tourists visiting ecotourism destinations in Indonesia. Participants expressed a profound sense of connection to the natural environment, describing feelings of awe, tranquility, and responsibility. This emotional bond with nature was often accompanied by heightened ecological awareness and a personal commitment to environmental conservation.

One participant shared, "I felt an indescribable peace just being surrounded by the forest. It made me realize how important it is to preserve this beauty for future generations." This narrative illustrates how the immersive natural environment facilitated a reflective and emotional experience, influencing the individual's perception of sustainability.

Another visitor highlighted the transformative impact of being in an unspoiled natural setting, stating, "Witnessing how the locals coexist with nature taught me to respect and protect the environment more consciously." This suggests that the authentic interaction with nature not only provided a memorable experience but also cultivated a sense of responsibility toward environmental stewardship.

These narratives indicate that the emotional and cognitive experiences associated with nature significantly contribute to the tourists' subjective understanding of sustainable tourism. The sense of connectivity with nature motivates tourists to adopt more environmentally conscious behaviors during and after their visit, supporting the long-term sustainability of the ecotourism destinations.

Empowerment of Local Communities

The theme of Empowerment of Local Communities was another significant finding, reflecting how tourists perceived their contributions to the local economy and community development. Many participants emphasized the meaningfulness of their experiences when they observed or participated in activities that directly supported local livelihoods.

One participant noted, "I felt more satisfied knowing that my spending here helped local families rather than large corporations." This statement underscores the emotional gratification associated with supporting community-driven tourism, which enhances the perceived value of the travel experience.

Similarly, another visitor expressed, "Interacting with the local community gave me a deeper appreciation of their culture and lifestyle. It felt good to know that my visit contributed to their well-being." This illustrates how tourists' experiences are enriched by meaningful social interactions, fostering a sense of connection and purpose.

These findings suggest that tourists' awareness of their economic impact influences their overall satisfaction and loyalty to sustainable destinations. The perceived contribution to community empowerment not only enhances their travel experience but also encourages a more ethical and responsible form of tourism consumption.

Ecological Awareness and Responsibility

The theme of Ecological Awareness and Responsibility was prominently observed among tourists who consciously chose ecotourism destinations due to their commitment to environmental sustainability. This awareness was often heightened by educational interactions with local guides or community members who shared knowledge about conservation efforts.

A participant recalled, "Learning about the endangered species and seeing their natural habitat made me realize the importance of responsible tourism. I became more cautious about my actions, like

avoiding plastic waste." This statement demonstrates how experiential learning facilitated by ecotourism settings can significantly influence tourists' environmental behaviors.

Another respondent mentioned, "I was impressed by how they manage waste and use renewable energy. It inspired me to adopt similar practices back home." This indicates the potential of sustainable tourism experiences to not only educate but also inspire long-term behavioral change.

These narratives reveal that ecological awareness is not merely a passive observation but an active engagement that translates into responsible actions. The heightened environmental consciousness nurtured through these experiences plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable practices, both at the destination and in tourists' daily lives.

Authenticity and Cultural Immersion

Authenticity and Cultural Immersion emerged as a key theme influencing tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism. Participants frequently mentioned the value of engaging with local traditions, cultural practices, and community narratives, which provided them with a more authentic and meaningful travel experience.

One tourist explained, "I loved learning how they make traditional crafts and participating in their cultural ceremonies. It was a genuine experience that I could never get from conventional tourist attractions." This narrative highlights how cultural authenticity enhances tourists' appreciation of local heritage and fosters cultural respect.

Another participant reflected, "Sharing meals with local families and hearing their stories gave me a deeper understanding of their way of life. It felt more meaningful than staying in a regular hotel." This indicates that the desire for authentic cultural experiences drives tourists to engage more deeply with local communities, leading to a richer and more memorable travel experience.

These findings underscore the importance of authenticity in shaping tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism. The opportunity to experience local culture firsthand not only satisfies tourists' quest for authenticity but also supports cultural preservation and intercultural understanding.

Support for Sustainable Practices

The theme of Support for Sustainable Practices illustrates tourists' inclination to endorse and participate in sustainable tourism initiatives. Participants expressed their preference for destinations that visibly implement sustainable practices, such as waste management, renewable energy usage, and conservation programs.

One participant emphasized, "I specifically chose this place because they actively promote environmental conservation. It made me feel like my visit was making a positive impact." This highlights how tourists' awareness of sustainability initiatives can influence their destination choices and travel behaviors.

Another tourist shared, "I appreciated how they minimized plastic usage and promoted eco-friendly products. It motivated me to reduce my environmental footprint even after returning home." This suggests that exposure to sustainable practices not only enhances tourists' satisfaction but also inspires continued eco-conscious behaviors.

These experiences reveal that tourists' support for sustainable practices is closely linked to their perception of environmental and social responsibility. The integration of visible and impactful sustainability initiatives reinforces tourists' commitment to responsible tourism, contributing to the long-term sustainability of ecotourism destinations.

The findings of this study reveal that tourists' subjective experiences and meanings of sustainable tourism are multifaceted and deeply rooted in emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions. The themes of Connectivity with Nature, Empowerment of Local Communities, Ecological Awareness and Responsibility, Authenticity and Cultural Immersion, and Support for Sustainable Practices collectively illustrate the complex interplay between tourists' experiences and their perceptions of sustainability.

These themes highlight how ecotourism destinations can strategically enhance tourists' experiences by fostering emotional connections with nature, facilitating meaningful cultural interactions, and actively promoting sustainable practices. The findings provide valuable insights for ecotourism managers and marketers in designing strategies that resonate with tourists' evolving perceptions of sustainability.

By capturing the essence of tourists' experiences and the meanings they derive from them, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable tourism within the context of ecotourism in Indonesia. The results underscore the importance of experiential authenticity, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship as core components of sustainable tourism experiences.

This study revealed that tourists visiting ecotourism destinations in Indonesia construct profound emotional and cognitive connections with nature, local communities (Chevrollier dkk., 2020), and sustainable practices. These connections shape their subjective meanings of sustainability, influencing their perceptions and behaviors in support of sustainable tourism. The findings address the research questions by uncovering how tourists make sense of their experiences and the underlying meanings they attach to sustainable tourism practices, providing a deeper understanding of the emotional and ethical dimensions that guide their choices.

The study provides significant insights into the subjective experiences of tourists, demonstrating that their understanding of sustainability goes beyond environmental awareness to encompass emotional resonance, cultural appreciation, and ethical responsibility (Martinez-Sanchez dkk., 2020). The theme of Connectivity with Nature illustrates how tourists develop emotional bonds that foster a sense of environmental stewardship. This finding highlights the emotional dimension of sustainability, where experiences of awe, tranquility, and responsibility motivate tourists to adopt eco-conscious behaviors. It also shows that tourists' emotional engagement with nature is a key driver of sustainable practices, offering a more nuanced perspective on environmental responsibility than previously suggested by behavioral models.

The theme of Empowerment of Local Communities reveals that tourists perceive sustainable tourism as a socially responsible practice that positively impacts local economies and cultural preservation. This perception enhances their travel satisfaction and loyalty to sustainable destinations, underscoring the social and ethical dimensions of sustainable tourism experiences (De Masi dkk., 2021). By highlighting the emotional gratification associated with contributing to community well-being, the study expands the understanding of ethical consumerism in tourism, showing that tourists are motivated not only by personal satisfaction but also by a desire to support social equity and cultural preservation.

Moreover, the theme of Authenticity and Cultural Immersion demonstrates that tourists seek meaningful cultural interactions that provide authentic and transformative experiences. This finding supports the idea that tourists' pursuit of cultural authenticity is intertwined with their ethical values and emotional needs, influencing their destination choices and behaviors. By emphasizing the importance of authentic cultural engagement, the study reveals how experiential authenticity contributes to the perceived value of sustainable tourism, enhancing tourists' sense of purpose and cultural appreciation.

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature by deepening the understanding of tourist experiences in sustainable tourism from a phenomenological perspective. Previous research has largely focused on behavioral intentions and satisfaction metrics using quantitative approaches (Weaver, 2001; Buckley, 2012), which fail to capture the subjective meanings and emotional dimensions of tourist experiences. This study addresses this gap by using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the lived experiences of tourists, revealing the emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions that shape their perceptions of sustainability.

The theme of Connectivity with Nature supports Tourist Experience Theory (Quan & Wang, 2004), which emphasizes the emotional and cognitive aspects of tourist experiences. However, this study extends the theory by revealing that tourists' emotional connections with nature also foster a sense of environmental stewardship, influencing their sustainable behaviors beyond the travel context. This finding suggests that emotional engagement is not merely a component of tourist satisfaction but a

driving force behind ethical and responsible tourism behaviors, contributing to the long-term sustainability of ecotourism destinations.

The theme of Empowerment of Local Communities aligns with the Triple Bottom Line concept of sustainability (Elkington, 1997), which emphasizes social equity alongside environmental and economic sustainability. However, this study offers a more nuanced perspective by demonstrating that tourists' perceptions of social equity are shaped by their emotional gratification and ethical values, rather than merely economic considerations. This finding challenges traditional economic models of tourist behavior, highlighting the importance of ethical consumerism and emotional satisfaction in sustainable tourism experiences.

The theme of Authenticity and Cultural Immersion resonates with existing literature on experiential authenticity but goes further to reveal that tourists seek transformative cultural experiences that provide existential meaning and ethical fulfillment. This aligns with existential authenticity theories but also highlights the ethical dimensions of cultural appreciation, suggesting that tourists' pursuit of authenticity is motivated by a desire for cultural respect and ethical engagement. This finding enhances the understanding of ethical tourism and suggests that sustainable tourism strategies should emphasize authentic cultural interactions to resonate with tourists' evolving ethical values.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications for the field of sustainable tourism and ecotourism management. The emotional connections tourists develop with nature, as revealed in the theme of Connectivity with Nature, highlight the importance of designing experiences that foster emotional engagement and environmental stewardship. This insight can inform the development of interpretive programs and educational initiatives that enhance tourists' emotional awareness and ecological responsibility. By emphasizing the emotional dimensions of sustainable tourism, destination managers can create more impactful experiences that resonate with tourists' environmental values and ethical commitments.

The theme of Empowerment of Local Communities underscores the role of social responsibility and ethical consumerism in shaping tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism. This finding suggests that sustainable tourism strategies should prioritize community engagement and social equity, emphasizing ethical contributions to local economies and cultural preservation. Practically, this means that community-based tourism initiatives should be designed to facilitate meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities, enhancing the perceived value of cultural authenticity and social impact. By integrating cultural immersion with ethical tourism practices, ecotourism destinations can attract tourists who are motivated by social justice and cultural respect, thus fostering a more inclusive and sustainable tourism model.

The theme of Authenticity and Cultural Immersion demonstrates that tourists seek transformative cultural experiences that provide existential meaning and ethical fulfillment. This insight has implications for experience design in sustainable tourism, suggesting that destinations should curate experiences that emphasize cultural authenticity and emotional resonance. By promoting authentic cultural interactions that respect and celebrate local traditions, tourism managers can enhance the existential authenticity of tourists' experiences, leading to higher satisfaction and emotional loyalty. Furthermore, the findings support the importance of ethical storytelling and cultural representation in marketing strategies, emphasizing narratives that resonate with tourists' ethical values and emotional aspirations.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) focuses on subjective experiences and meanings, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader tourist populations. The study involved a small, purposively selected sample of tourists who consciously chose ecotourism destinations with sustainability in mind, which may not reflect the experiences of more diverse tourist segments. This sampling approach was suitable for exploring deep, experiential meanings, but it restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to all ecotourism visitors.

Additionally, the study was conducted in specific ecotourism destinations in Indonesia, which are characterized by unique cultural, environmental, and social contexts. The cultural and geographical specificity of these destinations may influence tourists' experiences and interpretations of sustainability, limiting the transferability of the findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. Moreover, the phenomenological approach emphasizes subjective interpretations, which are inherently influenced by the participants' cultural backgrounds, personal values, and prior experiences. This introduces a contextual bias that should be acknowledged when considering the implications of the findings.

The use of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method may also introduce self-reporting biases, as participants might consciously or unconsciously present socially desirable narratives that align with ethical and sustainable tourism ideals. Although efforts were made to create an open and comfortable interview environment, the social desirability bias remains a potential limitation. Future studies could complement the findings with observational methods or longitudinal designs to capture behavioral patterns and experiential changes over time.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research in sustainable tourism and experiential consumer behavior. Future studies could expand the cultural scope by exploring how tourists from different cultural backgrounds construct meanings and interpret experiences of sustainability in diverse ecotourism contexts. Comparative studies between Western and Eastern tourists could provide deeper insights into how cultural values influence emotional engagement, ethical responsibility, and perceptions of authenticity. Such cross-cultural studies would enhance the understanding of cultural influences on sustainable tourism experiences, contributing to global tourism strategies that are culturally sensitive and emotionally resonant.

To address the limitations of generalizability, future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches that combine phenomenological inquiry with quantitative surveys to capture both subjective experiences and behavioral patterns. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional and cognitive dimensions influence sustainable tourism behaviors. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how tourists' experiences and meanings evolve over time, particularly how transformative experiences influence post-travel behaviors and long-term environmental stewardship.

Further research could also investigate the role of digital technologies and social media in shaping tourists' experiences and meanings of sustainable tourism. Exploring how tourists use social media to construct and share their experiential narratives could provide valuable insights into the social construction of sustainability meanings and the influence of digital storytelling on ethical tourism behaviors. Finally, future studies could explore managerial implications by examining how destination marketing and experiential design can enhance emotional engagement and ethical consumerism in sustainable tourism contexts, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability of ecotourism destinations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences and meanings that tourists attach to sustainable tourism in ecotourism destinations in Indonesia, addressing the need for a deeper understanding of emotional and cognitive dimensions in sustainable tourism. The findings reveal that tourists' experiences are shaped by emotional connections with nature, ethical responsibility toward local communities, and a desire for authentic cultural immersion, highlighting the emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of sustainable tourism. These insights contribute to the literature by providing a phenomenological perspective that goes beyond behavioral patterns and satisfaction metrics, offering a holistic understanding of how tourists construct meanings of sustainability. The study also demonstrates the importance of experiential authenticity and emotional engagement in influencing tourists' perceptions and sustainable behaviors, suggesting strategic implications for experience design and destination marketing. While the findings are context-specific, they provide a foundation for future research to explore cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal impacts of sustainable tourism

experiences. Further studies could also investigate the role of digital narratives in shaping sustainability meanings, enhancing the experiential and ethical dimensions of sustainable tourism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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