



## Understanding Community Perceptions of Tourism Development: A Phenomenological Study

I Made Bayu Wisnawa

Universitas Triatma Mulya, Indonesia

[kerjabayu@gmail.com](mailto:kerjabayu@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Community-based tourism has become an important area in tourism studies, focusing on the interactions between local communities and visitors in various social and cultural settings. However, while previous research has looked at the economic and organizational effects of tourism, less attention has been given to how local residents personally experience and understand tourism development. This study addresses the gap by exploring how communities in Bukit Lawang, Indonesia, perceive and adapt to tourists, focusing on their lived experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, the study provides deep insights into the changing relationship between hosts and visitors. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected community members and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four main themes emerged: initial ambivalence, negotiation of cultural identity, recognition of shared benefits, and adaptation strategies. The findings show that residents actively shape their roles in tourism, moving from uncertainty toward empowerment and collective action. This study enhances understanding of community-based tourism by highlighting the complex, local-specific ways communities perceive and respond to tourism changes. It suggests that phenomenological research can support more inclusive and sustainable tourism policies and practices. Future research should apply this approach to different cultural contexts to deepen both theory and practice.



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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as a multifaceted social phenomenon, has become a significant driver of change in communities worldwide. Beyond its economic contributions, tourism influences the cultural and social fabric of host societies, shaping interaction patterns, identity, and communal values (Darcy & Buhalis, 2021). In recent decades, community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged to empower local residents in shaping the development and presentation of their cultural heritage to outsiders (Kastenholz et al., 2022). These initiatives aim to build sustainable relationships between visitors and host communities, fostering mutual understanding and shared benefits.

Tourist presence in rural and traditional communities often triggers complex responses. While offering socio-economic opportunities, it also challenges established norms and lifestyles (Packer et al., 2019). As locals encounter new cultural values and behaviors, they renegotiate their sense of self and community within the global tourism context. These interpretations are influenced not only by economic interests but also by deeply rooted subjective meanings and shared experiences.

Despite growing interest in CBT, recent empirical studies remain limited in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of local residents in diverse cultural settings. This gap underscores the need for qualitative, phenomenological approaches that can reveal how communities perceive and adapt to tourism-driven change at a personal and collective level.

Understanding the lived experiences and evolving perceptions of local communities is crucial for developing sustainable tourism strategies that honor both economic goals and cultural integrity. While much of the existing literature has focused on the measurable impacts of tourism, there remains a pressing need to explore the nuanced, subjective dimensions of this phenomenon. Phenomenological

inquiry provides a pathway for examining the meanings attributed to tourism by those most intimately affected—illuminating how tourism is experienced, negotiated, and internalized within the social and cultural context of the host community (Almeida Santos et al., 2023). Through such exploration, new insights can emerge that enrich theoretical understanding and inform more responsive and inclusive approaches to community-based tourism.

Research focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals within specific social phenomena has gained increasing significance in recent years. Within the field of tourism studies, growing attention is being given to the lived realities and nuanced perceptions of local community members as they engage with and respond to the presence of tourists (Darcy & Buhalis, 2021). These investigations recognize that community members are not passive recipients of external influences, but rather active interpreters of the changes brought about by tourism initiatives (Kastenholz et al., 2022).

Despite this advancement, methodological challenges remain prevalent in capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences. Many previous studies have relied heavily on quantitative approaches or structured surveys, which, while valuable for measuring general trends, often fall short in revealing the underlying meanings, emotions, and evolving interpretations that define community-tourist relations (Packer et al., 2019). Such methods may overlook the unique voices, personal narratives, and context-specific factors that shape how individuals perceive and internalize their interactions with tourists.

As a result, much of the extant literature has been limited in its capacity to uncover the essence of local experiences within the dynamic context of community-based tourism. The reliance on aggregated data or externally defined categories can obscure the subjective realities at the heart of these phenomena, making it difficult to fully appreciate the processes by which meaning is constructed and negotiated. This gap underscores the need for research approaches, such as phenomenology, that are specifically designed to illuminate the rich, contextualized meanings embedded in the everyday experiences of community members (Almeida Santos et al., 2023).

Existing efforts to understand the dynamics of community-based tourism have often relied on practical, solution-oriented approaches such as program evaluation, policy analysis, or the assessment of economic impact. While these methods offer valuable insights for tourism development, they tend to emphasize measurable outcomes and broad generalizations at the expense of individual and collective meaning-making processes (Darcy & Buhalis, 2021; Kastenholz et al., 2022). Such approaches frequently fail to capture the subtleties of subjective experience—how local residents perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to the presence of tourists within their social and cultural context (Packer et al., 2019).

As a consequence, the richness and diversity of local voices are often underrepresented, and the deeper meanings that underlie attitudes and behaviors remain obscured. This limitation highlights the inadequacy of prevailing methodologies in revealing the nuanced processes by which communities construct and negotiate their sense of identity, belonging, and agency in response to tourism initiatives. To address this shortcoming, there is a pressing need to adopt phenomenological methods that prioritize the lived experiences and intrinsic meanings of community members. By embracing this perspective, research can move beyond surface-level observations to provide a more holistic and authentic understanding of the phenomenon at hand (Almeida Santos et al., 2023).

Previous research on community-based tourism has explored a range of topics, including community participation, cultural preservation, and the economic impact of tourism. Several studies have highlighted how local residents experience change in their social environment when interacting with tourists (Darcy & Buhalis, 2021; Kastenholz et al., 2022). Theoretical frameworks in the literature emphasize the role of subjective interpretation and lived experience in shaping community responses. However, there remains a need to deepen our understanding of the unique meanings and emotional responses that arise in these encounters (Packer et al., 2019). Methodological approaches that privilege measurable outcomes have often overlooked the depth of individual and collective narratives.

This article adopts a phenomenological approach to address these gaps and illuminate the meanings embedded in community perceptions. By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenology

allows for a holistic exploration of how local residents interpret and make sense of tourism in their everyday lives. This method was selected because it captures the richness of participants' stories and the nuances of their cultural context. In response to the knowledge gap, the phenomenological approach used here provides insights that cannot be reached through quantitative or surface-level qualitative methods. The findings offer a more authentic understanding of the dynamics at play in community-based tourism.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction to the context and significance of the phenomenon under study. It proceeds with an explanation of the methodological approach, followed by a detailed account of data collection and analysis. The results section presents major themes that emerged from the data, using direct quotes to illustrate participants' experiences. The discussion and conclusion sections interpret these findings in light of existing literature and propose implications for future research and community-based tourism practices.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of local community members regarding the presence of tourists in community-based tourism programs. This design was selected for its ability to capture the depth and richness of subjective experiences, allowing for the identification of the essential meanings underlying community members' responses to tourism development. The focus of phenomenology on individual and collective perceptions aligns with the aim to understand how meanings are constructed within a specific socio-cultural context. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was adopted, emphasizing the interpretation of personal narratives and the co-construction of meaning between participants and their social environment.

The researchers acknowledged their role as active interpreters in the research process, practicing reflexivity by maintaining reflective journals and engaging in ongoing discussions to critically examine potential biases and influence on data interpretation.

### **Participants**

Participants comprised adult residents of villages actively engaged in community-based tourism initiatives. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged 18 years or older who had direct involvement or significant interaction with tourism activities within their community for a minimum period of one year. Individuals with limited exposure to tourism or those who had relocated to the village within the past six months were excluded to ensure the relevance and depth of experiences collected. Purposive sampling was employed to capture a diverse range of perspectives based on age, gender, length of residency, and roles within the community (e.g., traditional leaders, youth representatives, women, and tourism business actors). The final sample consisted of fifteen participants (eight females and seven males), with ages ranging from 22 to 65 years (mean age: 41 years), representing a cross-section of social and economic backgrounds.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed in accordance with phenomenological research standards. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by participants to ensure privacy and comfort. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives about participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on the evolving relationship with tourists. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented by field notes documenting nonverbal cues and contextual details. The data collection process continued until thematic saturation was reached, determined through ongoing analysis where no new themes or significant insights emerged after several consecutive interviews, specifically after the twelfth interview, with confirmation by three additional interviews to ensure saturation.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) process. Data analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to facilitate immersion in the narratives. Meaningful units were identified and coded, followed by grouping similar codes into initial themes. These themes were iteratively refined and organized into overarching categories that captured the essence of participants' experiences. A thematic matrix was constructed to assist in the identification and validation of themes across cases. NVivo software was employed to manage data coding and retrieval, ensuring systematic and transparent analysis. The analytic process was guided by the objective to reveal both the commonalities and the uniqueness of each participant's perspective, resulting in a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was provided by all participants after a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and measures to protect their confidentiality and privacy. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. The study adhered to the ethical standards set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with applicable national and local regulations regarding research involving human subjects.

## **RESULTS**

### **Initial Ambivalence and Evolving Curiosity**

At the onset of community-based tourism programs, local residents often described feelings of ambivalence toward the presence of tourists. Many expressed both hope for economic improvement and uncertainty regarding potential cultural disruption. As one participant noted,

“At first, I did not know whether their arrival would be good or bad for us. We hoped they would help our village grow, but some elders were worried that our traditions would be ignored.”

Gradually, this ambivalence transformed into curiosity. The frequent encounters with tourists and involvement in cultural exchange activities allowed residents to observe and interact more closely. Another resident shared,

“When I saw them eager to learn our crafts and customs, I started to feel proud of what we have. It made me look at our own culture differently.”

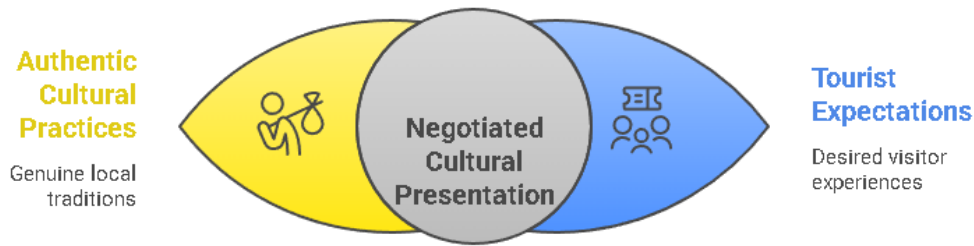
### **Negotiating Cultural Identity and Authenticity**

The integration of tourism into the community prompted ongoing negotiation of cultural identity. Residents became more conscious of their traditions, often striving to present an ‘authentic’ version of local life to visitors. However, this process was not without tension, as some felt the need to adapt or even modify certain practices to meet tourists' expectations. A community leader explained,

“We try to show what is real, but sometimes we change things a little so visitors can understand better. It is not always easy to decide what to keep and what to change.”

This negotiation led to a deeper reflection among residents regarding the value and meaning of their cultural heritage, as they balanced personal pride with commercial considerations.

### **Balancing Tradition and Tourism in Cultural Identity**



### Perceived Benefits and Social Cohesion

Participants widely recognized the tangible benefits brought by tourism, including improved infrastructure, additional income opportunities, and expanded networks. Beyond material gains, the presence of tourists fostered a renewed sense of unity and purpose within the community. As a youth representative commented,

“Because of the tourists, we started working together more—cleaning the environment, organizing events. It feels like the whole village has a common goal now.”

However, these benefits were not evenly distributed, and some participants voiced concerns over unequal access to opportunities. Nevertheless, many agreed that tourism had strengthened social cohesion, at least in the initial phases of program implementation.

### Emerging Tensions and Adaptation Strategies

Despite generally positive outcomes, the influx of tourists also generated tensions related to privacy, commercialization, and the pace of social change. Some residents felt overwhelmed by the attention or uncomfortable with the public display of previously private rituals. One elder remarked,

“Sometimes I wish things were quieter, like before. It’s not easy having strangers watch everything you do.”

To cope with these challenges, communities developed adaptation strategies such as rotating hosts, setting boundaries for visitor activities, and regular community meetings to address emerging issues. These strategies enabled the community to maintain a sense of agency and control over the tourism process.

The results reveal a complex and evolving dynamic in the perceptions of local communities toward tourists within the framework of community-based tourism. The findings highlight a journey from initial uncertainty to adaptation and empowerment, marked by ongoing negotiation of cultural values and collective efforts to harness tourism for shared benefit while preserving the integrity of local traditions.

## DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study reveal a nuanced journey in the local community’s perceptions toward tourists, progressing from initial ambivalence and curiosity to negotiation of cultural identity, recognition of collective benefits, and the development of adaptation strategies. These insights illuminate the essential meanings behind community-based tourism as experienced by residents, directly addressing the core research question regarding how local communities perceive, interpret, and respond to the presence of tourists within their social and cultural context.

The results of this research provide a meaningful response to the primary inquiry by demonstrating that local communities are neither passive recipients of change nor simply economic actors. Instead, they actively construct and reconstruct meanings through ongoing interactions with tourists. The emergence of pride in cultural heritage, increased social cohesion, and collective adaptation mechanisms suggest that the community’s engagement with tourism is dynamic and reflective. These findings extend existing knowledge by highlighting how emotional ambivalence,

negotiation of authenticity, and agency in adaptation are essential to understanding the lived experience of tourism development at the grassroots level.

These results are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of subjective meaning-making in community-based tourism (Darcy & Buhalis, 2021; Kastenholz et al., 2022). Similar to the findings of Packer et al. (2019), this study shows that host communities experience both opportunity and tension when faced with social and cultural transformation. The process of negotiating identity and authenticity in response to visitors echoes theoretical perspectives on cultural exchange and hybridity. However, this study's phenomenological approach further enriches the literature by uncovering the inner processes and emotional realities that often remain hidden in quantitative or surface-level qualitative research (Almeida Santos et al., 2023). Thus, it deepens our understanding of how community members internalize and make sense of change in a rapidly evolving tourism landscape.

The implications of these findings are significant for both theoretical understanding and practical application within the field of community-based tourism. On a social and cultural level, the study underscores the importance of recognizing local residents as meaning-makers who continually negotiate their place and identity in the face of tourism-driven change. Practically, the insights suggest that successful tourism initiatives must facilitate open dialogue, promote equitable participation, and support community-driven adaptation strategies to foster positive engagement and minimize potential tensions. These results can inform policymakers, tourism planners, and community leaders seeking to develop sustainable and inclusive tourism programs that respect and enhance the lived experiences of host populations.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. The research was conducted within a specific cultural and geographical context, focusing on a single community involved in tourism development. The use of purposive sampling and in-depth interviews, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, may limit the representativeness of the results across different settings or demographic groups. Furthermore, as with all qualitative research, the interpretation of participants' narratives is inherently shaped by contextual factors and may not capture the full diversity of perspectives present in broader populations (Packer et al., 2019; Kastenholz et al., 2022).

Looking forward, future research could build upon these findings by exploring similar phenomena across a wider range of communities, cultural settings, or stages of tourism development. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how community perceptions evolve over time, particularly as tourism initiatives mature or encounter challenges. Additionally, comparative research employing mixed methods could help triangulate and expand upon the themes identified here, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between tourism, culture, and community identity (Almeida Santos et al., 2023). Such efforts would further advance the field and contribute to the design of more resilient and responsive community-based tourism strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the dynamics of local community perceptions toward tourists in community-based tourism development, addressing the need to understand subjective experiences in rapidly changing social contexts. The findings reveal that local residents experience a journey from initial ambivalence to active engagement, negotiation of cultural identity, and adaptation in response to tourism. These insights highlight the community's agency in shaping their interactions with visitors and managing the social and cultural impacts of tourism. By applying a phenomenological approach, this research addresses gaps left by previous studies that overlooked the depth of lived experience and meaning-making processes.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a single geographic location and a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data were collected at one point in time, limiting insights into how perceptions might evolve longitudinally.

For policymakers and practitioners, the study underscores the importance of involving local communities actively in tourism planning and decision-making to ensure culturally sensitive and sustainable development. Practical recommendations include facilitating community forums to negotiate cultural identity and collaboratively develop adaptation strategies that balance tourism growth with preservation of local values. Future research could expand on these findings by examining similar phenomena in diverse settings and utilizing longitudinal or comparative approaches to further enrich understanding.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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