The influence mechanism of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience under the social exchange theory: A study on the moderating path of local identity

[ID]Zhang Yaling[1], [ID]Asad Ur Rehman[2], [ID]Ayesha Nawal[3], [ID] Ihtisham Ullah[4*]

[1]Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Malaysia Guangxi Electrical Polytechnic Institute, Nanning, China; 65787206@qq.com (Z.Y.).
[2]Graduate School of Management, Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Malaysia; asad_ur@msu.edu.my (A.U.R.).
[3]Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies, Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Malaysia; Ayesha_nawal@msu.edu.my (A.N.).
[4]Strategic Research Institute, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Ihtisham.ullah@apu.edu.my (I.U.).

Abstract: Based on social exchange theory, this study constructs a "community participation-experience quality" model to explore how community participation influences ecotourism experience quality and examines the moderating pathways of local identity. Theoretical analysis revealed that: (1) Community participation significantly enhances the functional, emotional, and meaningful dimensions of ecotourism experiences through the accumulation of social capital and emotional bonds; (2) Local identity amplifies the positive effect of community participation on experience quality; (3) Social capital and emotional connections mediate the relationship between community participation and experience quality. The theoretical contribution lies in integrating social exchange theory with the local identity framework, uncovering the dual driving mechanisms of community agencies in ecotourism development. Practically, ecotourism communities are advised to adopt participatory governance models, enhance host-guest interactions through resource-sharing platforms and cultural empathy activities, and strengthen identity cultivation via local memory narratives, thereby fostering a "community empowerment-value co-creation" sustainable development path. This research provides innovative strategies for optimizing ecotourism experiences and empowering community-driven growth.

Keywords: Community participation, Eco-tourism experience, Emotional connection, Experience quality, Local identity, Social capital.

1. Introduction

The quality of ecotourism experiences serves as a critical indicator of sustainable tourism development, with its conceptual framework evolving from singular environmental aesthetics to a multidimensional integration of "ecological perception, cultural interaction, and social responsibility." However, current ecotourism practices face significant contradictions. On one hand, commercialization has disrupted the balance between ecological sensitivity and experiential authenticity, while standardized services dilute the unique appeal of local cultures [1]. On the other hand, community participation often remains superficial, limited to economic collaborations such as commodity sales and basic services, with insufficient development of social capital and emotional bonds, thereby constraining the profound enhancement of experiential quality [2]. These challenges highlight the theoretical lag in transitioning ecotourism from a "resource-consumption" model to a "relational co-creation" paradigm.

This context has sparked academic debates over the impact of community participation depth on experiential quality. Empirical studies suggest that deeper community engagement, mediated by social

capital accumulation and emotional connection, can elevate experiential quality from functional satisfaction to meaningful resonance [3]. However, critical scholarship warns that excessive participation risks social capital depletion and emotional alienation due to power imbalances (e.g., marginalized community agency) or cultural misinterpretations (e.g., superficial consumption of local symbols by tourists) [4]. Central to this debate is the lack of systematic deconstruction of the synergistic mechanisms involving non-economic resources (social capital, emotional connection) within Social Exchange Theory (SET), particularly the overlooked moderating role of place identity.

Place identity, defined as individuals' emotional attachment and internalized meaning toward a destination [5] may enhance tourists' cultural decoding capacity of community-based social capital and reinforce the durability of emotional connection, thereby indirectly moderating the efficiency of translating "community participation" into "experiential quality." For instance, tourists with strong place identity are more likely to interpret the symbolic depth of cultural practices, fostering immersive emotional engagement. Conversely, those with weak identity may perceive participatory activities as "performative interactions," amplifying experiential volatility due to cultural dissonance. Yet, existing literature predominantly relies on fragmented case studies or singular theoretical lenses (e.g., stakeholder theory), lacking an integrative framework to unravel the multidimensional mechanisms (functional-emotional-meaningful) through which community participation shapes experiential quality. Crucially, the interpretation of non-economic resource synergies within SET remains underdeveloped.

Guided by Social Exchange Theory, this study constructs a "community participation–experiential quality" model, with a focus on the moderating effects of place identity, aiming to address two research questions:

(1) How does the depth of community participation influence ecotourism experiential quality through social capital accumulation and emotional connection reinforcement?

(2) Does place identity moderate the relationship between community participation and experiential quality?

Theoretically, this research advances SET by integrating non-economic resource exchange perspectives, transcending traditional "economic rationality" assumptions to reveal the synergistic mechanisms of social capital and emotional connection in shaping tourism experiences. Simultaneously, by delineating the moderating pathways of place identity, it propels ecotourism toward a paradigm shift from "behavioral interaction" to "meaningful symbiosis." Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for designing "social capital-emotional identity" dual-driven community participation models and developing place identity-oriented experiential scenarios, thereby supporting the targeted implementation of sustainable ecotourism goals.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1. Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that social interactions are fundamentally rational processes grounded in resource exchange, governed by core principles of reciprocity, equity, and power dynamics. Exchange resources encompass three categories: economic (material benefits), social (trust, prestige), and emotional (belongingness, identity) [6]. In tourism contexts, interactions between tourists and communities are viewed as the construction of reciprocal resource networks, the sustainability of which depends on both parties' perceptions of exchange fairness.

This study conceptualizes the depth of community participation as a non-economic exchange process involving social capital (e.g., cultural sharing, trust networks) and emotional connection (e.g., empathy, belongingness). By deconstructing the reciprocity mechanisms of "resource input-output" (e.g., communities offering cultural immersion opportunities ↔ tourists reciprocating with culturally respectful behaviors), it elucidates the pathways through which experiential quality is generated.

2.1.2. Place Attachment Theory

Proposed by Proshansky [7] Place Attachment Theory emphasizes individuals' emotional and symbolic connections to specific geographic spaces. This theory posits multidimensional affective connection between people and places, including place identity, place dependence, and affective bonding [8]. Place identity refers to the internalization of place-related symbols into self-conception (e.g., "I belong to this mountain forest"). Place dependence reflects reliance on a place's functional value (e.g., resource provision in ecotourism). Emotional connection arises from shared memories or cultural practices that foster emotional belonging.

This study focuses on the moderating role of place identity, arguing that tourists with strong place identity are more adept at decoding the deeper meanings of community cultural symbols (e.g., perceiving traditional rituals as ecological ethics rather than performances), thereby amplifying emotional resonance in social exchanges.

2.2. Literature Review

2.2.1. Community Participation

Community participation in tourism refers to the active involvement of local residents in decision-making, resource allocation, and activity design to achieve shared power and mutual benefits [9]. Murphy pioneered the application of community participation to tourism research, highlighting the economic and social potential of tourism development [10]. Early Chinese scholars, such as Tang and Li, explored the interactive relationship between tourism development and communities, emphasizing the importance of community participation in tourism planning. Extensive literature confirms that community participation enhances policy implementation effectiveness.

Community participation mainly includes economic participation, cultural participation, environmental participation and decision-making participation. Economic participation mainly refers to the participation of community residents in the benefit distribution mechanism (such as tourism revenue sharing). Some scholars emphasize that community residents should participate in the tourism planning and decision-making process to ensure that tourism development conforms to the interests and needs of the community. Cultural participation refers to the fact that community residents enhance tourists' understanding and identification with the local culture by showcasing and passing on it. For instance, Bao and Sun [11] research on community tourism in Yubeng Village found that by participating in tourism development and management, community residents not only increased their own income levels, but also enhanced their sense of identity and belonging to the community [11]. Environmental participation is the collaborative management of community residents' participation in ecological protection actions. Yang [12] discussed the positive role of community residents' participation in tourism development in environmental protection, arguing that residents' participation helps reduce the negative impact of tourism on the environment and promotes sustainable development. Decision-making participation means that community residents have a say in the planning and decision-making of tourism projects and can express their opinions and demands. Liu [13] believes that the community should be regarded as the main body and enter links such as tourism planning and development decision-making, which reflects the core idea of decision-making participation [14].

2.2.2. Ecotourism Experience Quality and Its Dimensions

Ecotourism experience quality reflects tourists' subjective perceptions and holistic evaluations of the integrated "ecological-cultural-social" value during ecotourism activities [15]. It transcends traditional unidimensional tourism experiences by emphasizing immersive natural engagement, deep cultural interaction, and equitable community participation, ultimately fostering cognitive shifts in ecological ethics, cultural identity, and social responsibility. Drawing on the research of Weaver and Lawton [16]; Pine II and Gilmore [17] and Zhang, et al. [18] the quality of ecotourism experiences can be categorized into three dimensions: functional quality, emotional quality, and meaningful quality.

Functional quality refers to the objective evaluation of the environment and services provided during eco-tourism by tourists, mainly including environmental comfort and service professionalism. Environmental comfort is mainly reflected in tourists' satisfaction with the natural environment (such as air quality, landscape beauty, noise level, etc.) and infrastructure (such as transportation convenience, accommodation conditions, sanitation facilities, etc.) of the tourist destination [16]. Environmental comfort directly affects the physical and psychological comfort of tourists. The professionalism of services is mainly manifested in tourists' evaluations of the professional capabilities and attitudes of tourism service providers (such as tour guides and scenic area managers) [19]. Effective ecological interpretation, for instance, enhances tourists' understanding of ecosystems and cultural contexts.

Emotional quality refers to the emotional responses and psychological experiences formed by tourists during the process of eco-tourism, mainly including cultural immersion and a sense of local belonging [17]. Cultural immersion refers to the deep understanding and emotional resonance that tourists gain towards the local culture through participating in cultural activities, experiencing the local lifestyle, etc. Local sense of belonging is the emotional attachment and sense of belonging that tourists have towards the tourist destination, which is usually manifested through interaction with local residents, familiarity with and identification with the local environment. A sense of local belonging can enhance tourists' travel satisfaction and willingness to revisit.

Meaningful qualities refer to the deep-level cognition and values formed by tourists during the process of eco-tourism, mainly including ecological ethics identification and the awakening of social responsibility. Ecological ethical identification is that tourists, through eco-tourism activities, develop a sense of respect and protection for the natural environment and identify with ecological ethical principles. This kind of recognition can prompt tourists to adopt more environmentally friendly behaviors in their daily lives. Social responsibility awakening is when tourists, through interaction with the local community and participation in ecological protection activities, become aware of their own responsibilities to society and the environment, thereby stimulating their willingness to participate in social public welfare and environmental protection actions [20].

2.2.3. The Positive Impact of Community Participation on Ecotourism Experience

As a core element of ecotourism, community participation critically enhances the quality and depth of experience. Residents, as custodians of local culture and ecology, contribute to authentic, enriching tourism encounters.

On the one hand, community participation has significantly enhanced the functional quality of the ecotourism experience. In terms of environmental comfort, community residents have effectively improved the quality of the natural environment by participating in ecological protection activities (such as tree planting, garbage cleaning, and trail maintenance, etc.), providing tourists with a more beautiful and comfortable visual and sensory experience. Meanwhile, community participation has also promoted the improvement of infrastructure, such as the enhancement of transportation convenience and sanitation conditions, further enhancing the comfort of tourists. In terms of service professionalism, community residents help tourists better understand the local culture and ecosystem by providing high-quality tour guide services and ecological explanations. The local characteristic catering and accommodation services have also enriched the experience of tourists and enhanced overall satisfaction [21].

On the other hand, community participation significantly affects the emotional quality of the ecotourism experience. Through in-depth interaction and joint participation in cultural activities, community residents can provide tourists with genuine cultural experiences, enhancing their sense of cultural immersion and belonging. For instance, local residents have not only enriched the emotional experience of tourists through cultural performances, handicraft displays and traditional festival activities, but also promoted the emotional connection between tourists and the community. This emotional bond can significantly enhance tourists' satisfaction and loyalty [22] making them more willing to actively participate in the ecological protection and cultural inheritance activities of the

community. However, excessive community participation may lead to cultural conflicts and tourist fatigue, thereby weakening the positive impact of emotional qualities. Therefore, moderate community participation and reasonable management strategies are crucial for maintaining the improvement of emotional qualities.

In addition, community participation has a profound impact on the meaningful quality of ecotourism experiences. Through in-depth interaction and joint participation in ecological protection activities, community residents can convey ecological ethics and environmental protection awareness to tourists and promote tourists' respect and identification with the protection of the natural environment [23]. In the process of participating in the ecological governance and cultural inheritance of the community, tourists not only enhance their understanding of the concept of sustainable development, but also inspire their sense of social responsibility, thus forming a long-term commitment to ecological protection at the psychological level. The improvement of this meaningful quality has enabled ecotourism to go beyond mere entertainment and leisure, becoming an important force in promoting environmental protection and social progress. However, the depth and manner of community participation need to be carefully designed to avoid weakening this positive impact due to cultural conflicts or tourist fatigue, and to ensure that the ecotourism experience can achieve true elevation at the emotional and cognitive levels.

2.2.4. The Moderating Role of Place Identity

Place identity significantly moderates the relationship between community participation and ecotourism experiences. Tourists with strong place identity actively engage in community activities, strengthening emotional ties and belongingness [24]. This identity enhances their decoding of cultural symbols (e.g., viewing rituals as ethical practices rather than spectacles), fostering deeper emotional and meaningful engagement. Moreover, place identity amplifies social responsibility, transforming functional satisfaction into meaningful symbiosis with sustainability goals.

3. Theoretical Model Construction

Based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the Local Identity theory, this study constructed a "community participation – Experience Quality" model, aiming to explore how community participation affects the quality of ecotourism experience through mediating variables (social capital and emotional connection), as well as the moderating role of local identity in this process, as shown in Figure 1.
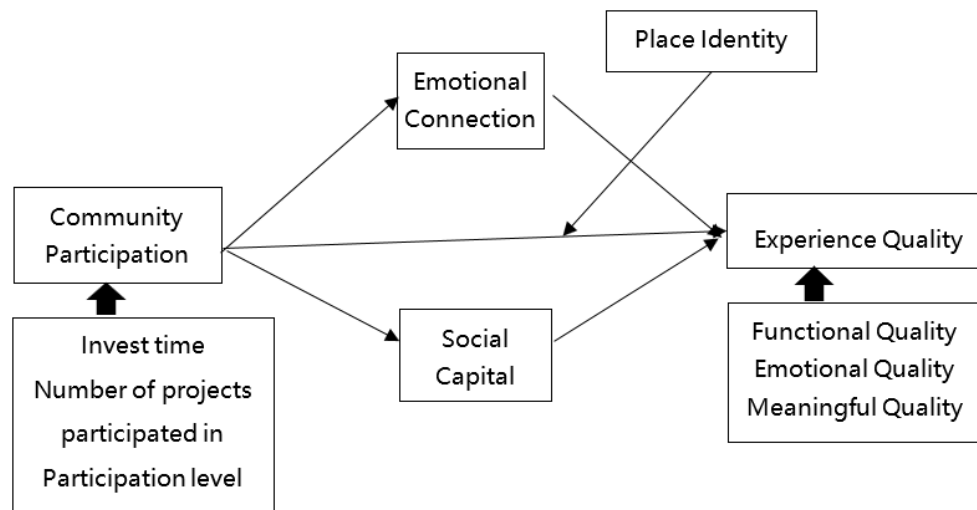
Figure 1.
The "Community participation – Experience Quality" Model.

3.1. Direct Impact of Community Participation on Experience Quality

The direct impact of community participation on ecotourism experience quality is multidimensional, encompassing functional, emotional, and meaningful dimensions. According to Social Exchange Theory (SET), communities exchange localized resources (e.g., ecological knowledge, labor) for external capital (e.g., tourism revenue, technology), with participation depth directly influencing functional quality. For instance, community involvement in ecological conservation (e.g., tree planting, waste management) and infrastructure development (e.g., trail maintenance, sanitation improvements) significantly enhance environmental comfort. Simultaneously, residents' provision of high-quality guiding services and ecological interpretation improves service professionalism. Empirical studies confirm that community participation substantially elevates satisfaction with environmental comfort and service professionalism [25].

Rooted in Place Attachment Theory, community participation triggers tourists' sense of belonging and empathetic identification through emotional resource exchanges (e.g., co-participation in cultural rituals). Deep engagement in cultural activities, such as performances, handicraft demonstrations, and traditional festivals, enriches tourists' emotional experiences and strengthens their emotional connection with the community [26]. These connections significantly enhance tourists' sense of belonging and identity.

Non-economic resources in social exchanges (e.g., cultural capital, ecological ethics) are internalized into tourists' sustainable behavioral intentions through deep participation. Collaborative ecological governance and cultural heritage activities foster tourists' recognition of ecological ethics and social responsibility. By engaging in conservation and cultural practices, tourists deepen their understanding of sustainability and commit to societal obligations [18], transforming ecotourism experiences from mere recreation into catalysts for environmental and social progress.

3.2. Mediating Role of Social Capital and Emotional Connection

Community participation has a profound impact on the quality of ecotourism experience through mediating variables (social capital and emotional connection). Social capital refers to the resources and support obtained through social networks and relationships, including trust, reciprocal norms and the ability to act collectively. According to the theory of social exchange, community participation promotes resource reciprocity and collaborative efficiency through the accumulation of social capital, thereby enhancing the quality of experience. Trust among community residents can promote cooperation, enhance the organizational efficiency of tourism activities, and provide higher-quality services for tourists. Reciprocal norms can promote cooperation between tourists and community residents [15]. For example, tourists participate in the ecological protection activities of the community, and community residents provide cultural experiences and tour guide services. This reciprocal behavior enhances tourists' sense of belonging and identity, thereby improving the quality of the experience. Community participation expands the social network of tourists, enabling them to obtain more information and support. For instance, through interaction with local residents, tourists not only acquire rich cultural knowledge but also establish long-term emotional connections. This network expansion significantly enhances the depth of tourists' experiences.

Emotional connection refers to the emotional bond between tourists and the tourist destination, including a sense of belonging and identity. According to the local attachment theory, community participation deepens and triggers tourists' cultural resonance and meaning internalization through emotional connection. Community participation, through shared cultural activities and interactions, not only enhances tourists' sense of belonging but also forms a sense of identification with the tourist destination through emotional exchanges with local residents. This sense of identity not only enhances the emotional quality of tourists, but also prompts them to be more willing to participate in ecological protection and social responsibility activities [18].

3.3. Moderating Role of Place Identity

In the influence of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience, local identity plays an important moderating role. Local identity can significantly influence the role of community participation in the quality of experience by strengthening the emotional bond between tourists and tourist destinations. When tourists have a strong sense of local identity with the tourist destination, they are more willing to actively participate in community activities. Such participation not only enhances the emotional connection between them and local residents but also improves the emotional quality of their travel experience [27]. Furthermore, place identity fosters social responsibility, motivating tourists to contribute to ecological conservation and community development. This ethical awakening enhances meaningful quality, aligning ecotourism experiences with sustainability goals.

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1. Research conclusion

This study, based on the background of ecotourism and the theory of social exchange, deeply explores the influence of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience and reaches the following key conclusions:

(1) The significant positive impact of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience. Studies have found that community participation can significantly enhance the quality of ecotourism experiences. When community residents actively participate in all aspects of eco-tourism, such as ecological protection activities, tourism service provision, cultural heritage and display, etc., they can create a richer and higher-quality tourism experience for tourists. The participation of community residents not only improves the environmental comfort of the tourist destination but also enhances the quality of tourists' experiences at multiple levels such as sensory, cognitive and emotional by providing tourism services with local characteristics. This kind of active participation presents tourists with a real and vivid image of the tourist destination, enabling them to have a deeper understanding of the local culture, nature and lifestyle, thereby enhancing the overall tourism experience.

(2) The mediating role of social capital and emotional connection. The research reveals the internal mechanism by which community participation affects the quality of ecotourism experience through two mediating variables: social capital and emotional connection. On the one hand, community participation promotes the accumulation of social capital, including enhancing trust, norms and network relationships among community residents. The enhancement of this kind of social capital provides residents with more resources and support, enabling them to carry out tourism-related activities more effectively, such as jointly operating tourism projects and sharing tourism information, thereby offering tourists better services and richer experiences. On the other hand, community participation has also strengthened the emotional connection between community residents and tourists. Through joint participation in community activities, interactive communication, etc., tourists and local residents establish emotional bonds, enabling tourists to gain deeper emotional satisfaction and enhancing the emotional quality of the tourism experience. This emotional connection not only enables tourists to feel the hospitality of the local residents but also gives them a sense of belonging and identity during the travel process, making the travel experience more unforgettable and meaningful.

(3) The moderating role of local identity. This study found that local identity plays an important moderating role in the relationship between community participation and the quality of ecotourism experience. When tourists have a strong sense of local identity towards the tourist destination, the positive impact of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience is more significant. This is because local identity enhances tourists' emotional attachment and sense of belonging to the tourist destination, making them more willing to actively engage in community activities and establish closer ties with local residents. In this case, the participation behavior of community residents can better meet the psychological needs of tourists and further enhance the quality of tourists' travel experience. Meanwhile, local identity also prompts community residents to more actively showcase and pass on the

local culture and values, enabling tourists to experience the local characteristics more deeply, thereby enhancing the uniqueness and appeal of the tourism experience.

4.2. Theoretical contribution

(1) Expand the application scenarios of social exchange theory. This study applies the social exchange theory to research on the impact of community participation on the quality of ecotourism experience, further expanding the application scenarios of this theory. By revealing how community participation affects the quality of experience through social capital and emotional connection, the connotation and extension of the social exchange theory in the field of tourism have been enriched. This expansion not only provides a new theoretical perspective for explaining the complex relationship between community participation and tourism experience but also offers useful references and lessons for the future application of social exchange theory in the study of other tourism phenomena and issues.

(2) Deepen the understanding of moderating variables. Introducing local identity as a moderating variable has deepened the understanding of the relationship between community participation and the quality of ecotourism experience. The research finds that local identity can significantly enhance the positive impact of community participation on the quality of experience. This conclusion provides a new idea for exploring the boundary conditions that affect the effect of community participation. Meanwhile, the importance of local identity in tourism experience is also emphasized, suggesting that future research can further focus on the formation mechanism, influencing factors of tourists' local identity and its multi-faceted roles in the tourism process, in order to reveal the influencing factors and action paths of tourism experience more comprehensively.

4.3. Practical Implications

The practical enlightenment of this study lies in that ecotourism communities should actively encourage residents to participate in the planning, organization and management of tourism activities, enhance the depth and breadth of residents' participation by providing training and resource support, and at the same time strengthen the social network by establishing trust and mutual benefit norms to promote interaction and cooperation ability among residents. In addition, the community should organize cultural activities and ecological protection projects to enhance the emotional bond between tourists and the community and increase tourists' sense of belonging and identity. Policy makers should encourage community residents to participate in ecotourism activities through policy and financial support, formulate policies to protect local culture and natural resources, ensure the sustainable development of ecotourism, and enhance the local identity of tourists and community residents through publicity and educational activities.

4.5. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study supports the rationality of the model through theoretical analysis and some empirical research, the specific paths and mechanisms of the model still need to be verified through more systematic empirical research. Future research can adopt methods such as structural equation models to further verify the relationships among various variables in the model and their moderating effects.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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