

Article

Emotional Contracts, Authenticity Paradox, and Community-Led Heritage Tourism: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Pacu Jawi Tradition in Indonesia

Elsa Philiani^{1*}, and Bakti Setiawan²

Corresponding author. *Email: elsaphiliani@mail.ugm.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines how the Pacu Jawi bull-racing tradition in Nagari Tuo Pariangan, Indonesia, sustains its cultural vitality through community-led participation despite limited tourism infrastructure. Using a mixed-methods design that integrates surveys of 68 visitors, qualitative interviews with six key actors, and three-month field observations, the study applies Social Exchange Theory and Tourism Experience Theory to assess experiential quality, stakeholder interactions, and cultural resilience. Findings reveal that Pacu Jawi is maintained not through formal tourism planning but through what this research identifies as an emotional contract: a shared sense of pride, hedonistic pleasure, and cultural identity that motivates stakeholders regardless of economic trade-offs. While authenticity perceptions are exceptionally high (4.83/5), visitor engagement remains low (2.86/5), producing an authenticity paradox in which traditional organization safeguards cultural integrity but limits cross-cultural exchange and inclusive tourism development. Economic spillovers emerge across five local sectors, yet knowledge sharing and interpretive programming remain weak. The predominance of local spectators (94 percent Minangkabau) reinforces “sustainable insularity,” enabling preservation but restricting diversification of visitor markets. The study concludes that enhancing interpretive communication, sensitive infrastructure improvements, and inclusive participation frameworks can transform Pacu Jawi into a more accessible yet culturally grounded heritage tourism model.

Keywords: Heritage Tourism, Authenticity Paradox, Social Exchange Theory, Community Participation, Emotional Contracts.

¹ Elsa Philiani, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. elsaphiliani@mail.ugm.ac.id

² Bakti Setiawan, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. bobi.setiawan@ugm.ac.id

I. Introduction

In the middle of the relentless waves of globalization, local traditions face the threat of being extinct and being substituted by a homogenized culture, as can be seen anywhere [1]. The active engagement of the community is the key to ensuring that these traditions not only are preserved but also are able to meet the shifting needs of society in both economic and social resilience [2]. These activities are deeply related to their significance. Beyond external influences, their endurance is largely sustained by the shared sense of collective identity they inherited.

In this context, quality tourism emerges as a strategic framework to preserve and revitalize local traditions. The definition of quality tourism experience heavily depends on many different stakeholders, ranging from tourism industry actors to governmental agencies, tourists, and local communities. The concept of quality tourism has evolved from, initially, its emphasis on service excellence, visitor satisfaction, and marketing strategies to incorporate sustainability as the core principle [3][4]. As stated by reference [5], the shift toward sustainability reflects increasing awareness of the environmental and cultural risks resulting in disorganized tourism. In this research, the concept of quality tourism is not only used to enhance the experience of visitors but also used to generate tangible economic benefits for industry stakeholders while fostering both social and cultural gains for the local people. The quality tourism in this integrated approach was positioned as both a preservation mechanism for intangible heritage and a catalyst for resilient development centering on the community. This study employed the theoretical framework of the tourism experience, complemented by the sustainability principle, to examine the tourist experience, with an emphasis on generating both economic value and socio-cultural benefits for the local communities. The latter dimension was further explored through the lens of Social Exchange Theory, which provided a critical understanding of how perceived benefits and costs shape community attitudes toward the development of tourism.

1.1. Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory provides a conceptual lens to assess the value of social activities and interactions critically [6]. This research examined four fundamental principles of the theory: the balance between benefits and sacrifices, the interplay of power and dependence [7], the principle of reciprocity [8], and the role of emotional and hedonic incentives [9]. Social exchange is rooted fundamentally in the principle, according to reference [7], that explains the balance of rewards and sacrifices. Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a robust framework to evaluate the value of social activities and interactions based on the costs and rewards in these exchanges. This theory states that interpersonal interactions are transactional when individuals aim to maximize rewards and minimize costs [10] [11]. In almost all social interactions, individuals naturally engage in an internal calculus: "Does what I contribute equal what I earn?" This premise supports the rational character of human behavior, showing a basic assessment of emotional, temporal, and energetic investments. However, the perception of the balance of rewards and sacrifices is not utterly objective or rational; instead, constructed by subjective interpretations of the value.

A psychological dissonance could emerge when individuals realize that the benefits they receive do not outweigh their sacrifices, including time, effort, attention, or other resources. Conversely, if the perceived rewards meet or exceed their level of sacrifice, social

ties tend to be more sustained and even stronger. However, the principle of balance operates within a broader and more nuanced framework, shaped by the dynamics of power and dependency. When imbalances occur, where one party consistently provides more benefits than the other, relational asymmetry forms, resulting in a power hierarchy. The party providing bigger rewards will automatically have a dominant position in the exchange. This imbalance eventually results in dependency where the party receiving more benefits tends to be dependent on the giver, creating a power hierarchy that influences the overall relational dynamic. In this study, the principle must be considered to understand the relationship between tourists and tourism service providers. Each stakeholder must gain a sufficient level of balance to sustain social interactions.

To maintain relational harmony and prevent excessive power disparities, the reciprocity principle serves as a safeguard mechanism. As proposed by reference [8], this principle of reciprocity acts as a moral compass in social exchange, where every goodwill creates an expectation of an equally good return. Reciprocity, therefore, not only maintains the balance but also assures the sustainable relation. When someone gives goodness in hope for a return, it can be interpreted as making an investment in the relationship. This pattern creates a positive cycle that strengthens social cohesion and builds mutual trust. However, if the expectation of reciprocity is not fulfilled, the resulting imbalance might ruin the relationship and even break the interaction.

The last aspect to study is hedonism as a hidden motivation. While the three previous principles focus on rational and structural aspects of social exchange, the hedonistic principle reveals an emotional dimension that is equally important. This perspective acknowledges that humans are driven not only by materialistic or functional rewards but also by affective benefits such as pleasure, satisfaction, and emotional fulfilment derived from social interaction [12]. This hedonistic value often becomes a hidden factor that determines the maintained relationship even when rational calculations show imbalances. Feelings of appreciation, recognition, or belonging are the aspects that can generate emotional benefits compensating for the deficiencies of other aspects. For instance, an employee might accept a lower salary in exchange of emotional satisfaction in a positive working environment, acknowledgment of their contribution, and a strong feeling of organization. All those four principles—balance, power-dependence, reciprocity, and hedonism—cannot work separately; they intersect and interact to form a complex nature of social exchange. The balance of rewards and sacrifices is the initial evaluative foundation, which is later modified by power and dependency dynamics. Reciprocity functions as a stabilizing mechanism in a relationship, while the hedonistic dimension provides an emotional rationale that may change the perception of the exchange. Together, they offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing social interactions, particularly within the tourism field.

1.2. Tourism Experience Theory

The quality of tourism experience can be measured by using six interrelated dimensions: authenticity [13], tourist engagement [14], cultural and heritage value [15], physical and visual [16], culinary and craft components [17] [18], and emotional impact [19].

Authenticity is the most fundamental element of cultural tourism. This concept understanding has evolved significantly, from classic definitions that emphasized absolute authenticity to more flexible contemporary understandings. Reference [14] critiques the

commodification of authenticity, warning of “staged authenticity,” in which experiences are modified to meet tourist expectations. On the other hand, reference [20] introduces the notion of negotiated authenticity, in which co-creation between tourists and hosts can result in meaningful experiences. In the context of cultural tourism, authenticity is not assessed just from its physical appearance, but more from what the tourist perceived, the depth of local social interaction, and engaging participation of the local [21] [22]. This approach allows traditions like Pacu Jawi to retain their cultural essence while accommodating the expectations of modern tourism. In transforming visitors from passive spectators into active participants, tourist engagement plays a pivotal role. Enabling direct involvement in cultural life can improve their experience to be more meaningful. Reference [23] reported that contemporary tourists now search for hands-on experiences that allow them to be more connected with and embody the everyday realities of local communities. This engagement can manifest in several activities, such as festival participation, interpersonal interaction with locals, and emotional involvement throughout the travel experience.

This aligns with reference [24] that introduces the concept of The Tourist Gaze, which argues that tourism experience is formed by how tourists watch the place based on socially constructed expectations. Active tourist involvement in the destinations can counter the effects of media-filtered imagery, offering authentic and more personal experiences. Both cultural and heritage components are the substantive core of cultural tourism [25] [26]. Reference [27] reported that heritage tourism is often presented in romanticized or reconstructed elements to please visitors, yet authenticity can still be preserved through a careful presentation that emphasizes cultural narratives, tangible heritage, and historically significant practices. Reference [15] adds that the experiential aspect of what people can do in the heritage is often more influential than just static displays. In the case of Pacu Jawi, the tradition delivers deep cultural values of the Minangkabau people by providing a dynamic and educational spectacle.

Physical and visual elements remain vital as initial cues for tourists in forming the perception of authenticity and quality tourism. As reference [16] notes, tourists' impression is significantly formed by the material and aesthetic presentation of a destination, which includes architectural uniqueness, landscape authenticity, environmental preservation, and the overall visual coherence of the site. For Pacu Jawi, the landscape of green rice fields, traditional Minangkabau architecture, and rural landscape adds the experiential quality of tourism by grounding it in a tangible cultural setting. Culinary and craft are also key elements that are not merely consumables but expressions of identity and heritage. Tourists mostly derive experiential value from authentic local food, traditional crafts, and witnessing artisanal production methods.

Emotional aspects refer to the culmination of previously mentioned experiential elements. Reference [19] emphasizes that emotional resonance, which can be reflected in satisfaction, loyalty, willingness to recommend, and a sense of connection, indicates a high-quality tourism experience. Emotional impact enables the long-term sustainability of a tourism destination if visitor retention and encouraging organic promotion through word-of-mouth are maintained. These six dimensions are inseparable; they interconnect and mutually reinforce one another in creating a cohesive, immersive, and emotionally resonant tourism experience. In the case of Pacu Jawi in Nagari Tuo Pariangan, the synergy among these elements may facilitate the preservation of local tradition as well as add the value of sustainable and inclusive cultural tourism development.

II. Methods

The research conducted a mixed-method approach, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, to explore the subject matter comprehensively. Quantitative data were taken from visitors who represent a larger population through questionnaires using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 68 visitor respondents who had attended the Pacu Jawi event were chosen using purposive sampling. In-depth interviews were carried out with six key tourism stakeholders to collect qualitative data. The researcher also conducted field observations to enhance the validity of the findings by verifying data from questionnaires and interviews. The researcher also participated in the local tourism activities and interactions. The research was conducted from February to April 2025 in Pariangan, located in Tanah Datar Regency. This integrative approach was done to gain a holistic understanding of the Pacu Jawi event as well as its socio-economic and cultural dimensions.

III. Results

3.1. Respondent Profile

In the past, the Minangkabau people traditionally plowed their fields by hoeing the soil manually. Over time, an innovative method, involving the use of iron plates pressed into the mud and pulled by oxen, was introduced by Datuk Tantejo Gurhano, a prominent community leader. This innovation has become the foundation of the Pacu Jawi tradition ever since. Pacu Jawi then evolved into a festive event that is held after the harvest, just before the planting season. Unlike other races, Pacu Jawi does not have a winner. Instead, the community will evaluate the cows based on their ability to run straight and fast, and the jockey remains stable. The cows that perform well will be valued higher in terms of the price, even attracted viewers can purchase them directly in the event.

Pacu Jawi is held every Saturday except during Ramadan. The event is hosted alternately among four sub districts: Rambatan, Sungai Tarab, Pariangan dan Limo Kaum. Each sub district will host the event for four respective weeks before it is passed to the next host. This schedule is decided by three prominent elements: the government, ninik mamak (traditional leaders), and the youth. This makes the Pacu Jawi an event that shows communal interest, the sacred role of traditional leaders, and government support to preserve local heritage. After the schedule is set, the community will discuss which rice fields to host the event. The information is then shared through different platforms, such as WhatsApp community group, social media, and word of mouth among communities of Pacu Jawi enthusiasts. In addition, Tanah Datar Regency's Tourism and Sport Office regularly promotes the event via extensive social media campaigns to spread awareness.

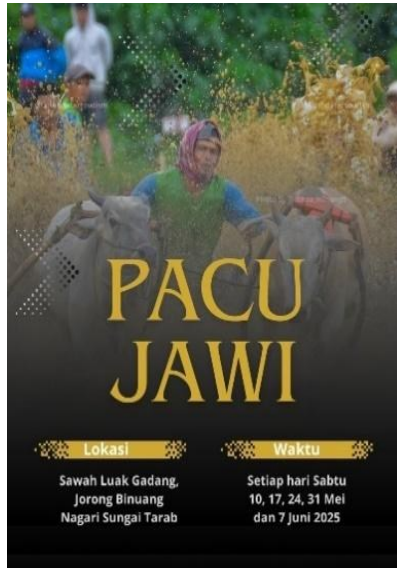


Figure 1. Digital flyer of Pacu Jawi
Source: tanahdatartourism

Not only from local people, but Pacu Jawi also gains interest from domestic and international tourists, particularly to photographers. Recognizing the high interest, the event organizer initiated a photography competition as part of the festival. Such an initiative is a form of adaptive strategy to meet the needs of contemporary time while still preserving the essence of the culture.



Figure 2. Photographer in the Pacu Jawi area
Source: <https://travel.detik.com>

The study collected data from 68 visitors with the same number of males and females, 34 each. The majority of them were Minangkabau ethnicity, with 94% of them living in West Sumatra. Most of them were professionals (78%), followed by retirees (12%), students (9%), and only 1% of them were freelancers. The data obtained were analyzed using the SPSS

program which allowed the researcher to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. A significant level of 95% ($\alpha = 5\%$) and degrees of freedom (df) of 44 (46-2) were applied in this analysis. The calculated r-value (r count) and the critical r-value (r table) were then compared, and it revealed that all r counts exceeded the r table value of 0.297, meaning all questionnaire items were confirmed as valid. Following this, the reliability of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.984, above the acceptable threshold of 0.6. This indicated that the questionnaire items were both reliable and robust to be used in the research.

Table 1. Reliability Statistic

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.984	46

The scoring range was categorized into three different levels: low (L) for 1.00–2.33, medium (M) for 2.34–3.67, and high (H) for 3.68–5.00.

Table 2. Social Exchange Questionnaire Results (Visitors)

Indicator	Sub-indicators	Score/Level
Advantages	cost commensurate with experience	4.17/H
	cost is commensurate with knowledge	3.93/H
	satisfied with the attraction	4.07/H
	having a unique experience	4.28/H
Sacrifice	time is worth the experience	4.07/H
	no trouble to witness	3.86/H
	effort feels natural	3.90/H
	comfortable while watching the event	3.93/H
Power and Dependency	free to move at events	3.62/M
	transparent parking fees etc.	3.83/H
	Pacu Jawi information is easily available	3.52/M
	easy access to facilities	3.48/M
Social Reciprocity	society appreciates visitors	3.86/H
	communication to organizers is good	3.55/M
Hedonist	pleasant experience	4.10/H
	interaction with locals is comfortable	3.90/H

	happy to share stories with the audience	3.79/H
	happy while watching the event	4.17/H
Emotional	gives a deep impression	4.31/H
	want to repeat watching	4.21/H
	will recommend the event	4.38/H
	enhancing the appreciation of tradition	4.17/H

Table 3. Results of the quality tourism experience Questionnaire (Visitors)

Indicator	Sub-indicators	Score
Authenticity	authentic tradition	4.83/H
	positive interaction to the organizer	3.69/H
	Memorable experience	4.55/H
	see event preparation	4.00/H
Engagement	actively involved in events	2.86/M
	interaction to the organizer	3.00/M
	get to know the life of a cattle farmer	2.86/M
	enthusiasm for the event	4.34/H
Culture and Heritage	very good event quality	4.28/H
	tradition preservation	4.52/H
	unique/authentic organization	4.62/H
	get event history info	3.69/H
Physical and Visual	arena conditions are very favorable	4.14/H
	authentic locations like the original landscape	4.45/H
	comfortable spectator area	3.59/M
	equipment is still traditional	4.62/H
Culinary	eating and drinking event specialties	3.90/H
	unique snacks sold	3.90/H
	interesting local crafts	3.45/M
	souvenirs available in good quality	3.07/M

Emotional	gives a deep impression	4.31/H
	want to repeat watching	4.21/H
	will recommend the event	4.38/H
	enhancing the appreciation of tradition	4.17/H

Based on the interviews conducted with various stakeholders of the Pacu Jawi event, including the chief organizer, committee members, cow owners, jockeys, parking attendants, and traders, the scores for each sub-indicator of social exchange were as follows:

Table 4. Social Exchange Interview Scoring (Pacu Jawi Performers)

Indicator	Sub-indicators	Score
Advantages	Increase income	4/H
	Promotion of local traditions	4.5/H
	Feel appreciated if visitors are enthusiastic	4.8/H
	Improve new skills	3.8/H
Sacrifice	Pacu jawi preparation is easy	4.1/H
	Crowds of visitors are not disturbing	4.8/H
Power and Dependency	Fair profit sharing	4.6/H
	Income is highly dependent on the number of visitors	4.8/H
	Have control over the execution of the event	4/H
Social Reciprocity	Knowledge exchange between me and the visitors	2.8/M
	Mutual respect between travelers and implementers	4.2/H
Hedonist	The Pacu Jawi event makes me proud of local traditions	5/H
	The more viewers, the happier and prouder	5/H
	The positive response from visitors makes me happy	5/H

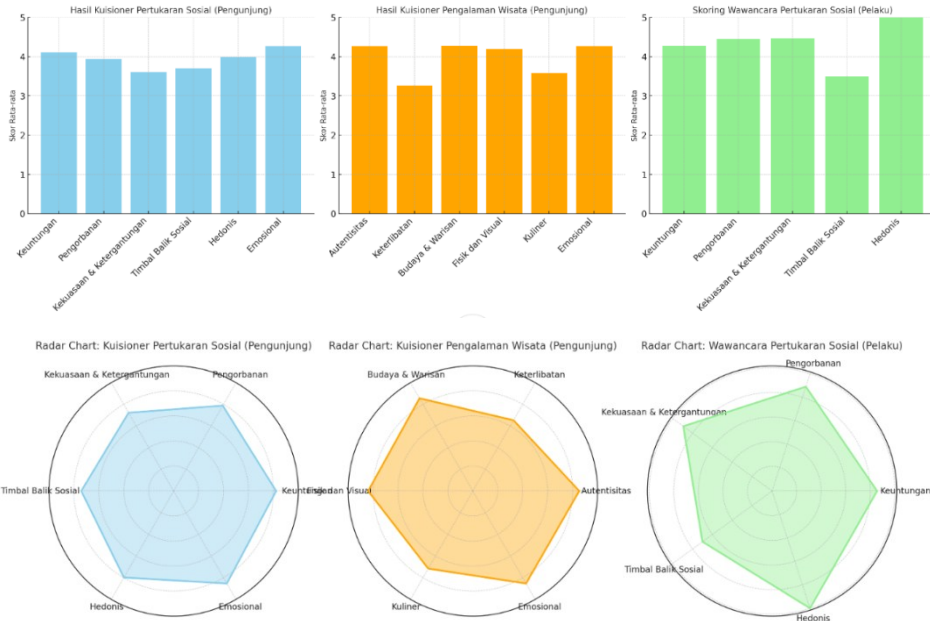


Figure 3. Visualization of indicator scores in social exchange, quality tourism experience (visitors) and indicator scores on social exchange (actors)

Source: Author's analysis

IV. Discussion

4.1. Social Exchange

Empirical findings revealed a complex dynamic between visitors and tourism practitioners. From the perspective of visitors, the benefits gained correlated strongly with increasing hedonistic satisfaction, particularly in getting unique experiences (4.28). This correlated with the enjoyment of pleasurable experiences (4.10) and emotional uplift from witnessing the event (4.17). These findings aligned with emotional motivation in the framework of social exchange theory. In contrast, tourism practitioners feel more substantial gains, especially in terms of economic aspect and social recognition (4.80 for feeling appreciated), while visitors emphasize more on affective and experiential gratifications.

Table 5. Economic activities generated by the Pacu Jawi event

No.	Economic Activity	Unit
1	Culinary Trade	50 stalls
2	Toy Trade	20 stalls
3	Parking	500-1000 units/day
4	Increased selling value of cattle	2-3x fold
5	Rice fields become loose and fertile	1 million Rupiahs/ planting period



Figure 4. Parking and trade/culinary area

Source: Field documentation

A compelling pattern was shown from the power and dependence principles, in which the operators of tourism had a high control over the execution of the event (4.0), yet still showed a significant dependence on visitor attendance (4.8). This condition creates a paradox in the power structure, in which those who have control are also reliant on others. From the visitors' perspective, the limited access to facilities and reliable information (3.48 and 3.52, respectively) suggested a weak position in the power hierarchy despite being greatly influential to the sustainability of the event.

The most critical aspect revealed in this finding is the low score of social reciprocity, especially in the knowledge exchange between the participants and visitors (2.8). This condition may be attributed to the fact that the main visitors are local residents who come without any cultural intention but to enjoy the race, local cuisine, or simply spend time with family on the weekend. Nevertheless, there is still a segment of the audience who is genuinely attracted to the cows racing. This group of audience observes which cows are good, which can run straight, fast, whose jockey remains stable, and hold high market value. They are also curious about which cows will perform better in the future. For them, interactions with participants are more extensive than those who just come for the euphoria and culinary enjoyment. However, the low level of knowledge exchange indicated that Pacu Jawi has not functioned as an effective medium for cultural transmission, especially for visitors from other regions, although mutual respect between stakeholders exists (4.2).

The most significant finding is that hedonistic and emotional satisfaction among both visitors and participants were consistently high; all hedonistic sub-indicators scored above 4.0. This confirmed that Pacu Jawi has successfully created "emotional reward" that compensates the imbalance in other functional aspects. The pride of participants in local tradition (5.0) and visitors' emotional satisfaction (4.31) showed that hedonist value has become the main driving force in preserving this tradition, aligned with the concept of hidden motivations in social exchange.

4.2. Quality Tourism Experience

In terms of tourism experience, there was a notable contradiction between the high perception of authenticity (4.83) and the low level of visitor engagement (2.86). Although tourists recognize the authenticity of the Pacu Jawi tradition, they tend to be only passive observers rather than active participants. The low score of tourists' active involvement (2.86)

and the limitations of knowing more about cattle farmers (2.86) inferred that Pacu Jawi has not been used as a medium of cultural immersion. The high score in cultural and heritage dimensions (4.28–4.62) confirmed that Pacu Jawi has maintained its cultural substance, revealing the significance of heritage in enhancing the authenticity. However, the limitation to providing historical information (3.69) reflected a gap in the educational aspect that is supposed to be an integral part of cultural tourism, potentially decreasing the depth of experience of the tourists.

Physical and visual aspects showed a duality that refers to Pacu Jawi as an authentic cultural practice, yet it has not fully been adapted to the demands of modern tourism. The high score of landscape authenticity (4.45) and traditional equipment (4.62) confirmed the significance of physical elements in forming perceptions of authenticity. The infrastructure, for example, was very simple, with only wooden grandstands or even without the grandstands, where people only gather around the racing area. This discomfort in the audience area (3.59) reveals a trade-off between authenticity preservation and accommodation of modern visitors' needs.



Figure 6. Visitor's view of the spur
Source: Field documentation

These limited facilities are generally tolerated by the audience because the majority of them are local people who live near the venue. Most of them typically spend less than three hours at the event, and if they need to use the restroom or do prayer, they can just go home. Meanwhile, those who are passionate about races tend to stay longer, until the event is complete, even skipping meals during the game. This suggests that the amenities conditions are still acceptable to the visitors who are excited about the event, culinary, family leisure, or cow racing. However, this also means that Pacu Jawi has not yet optimized its infrastructure for non-local tourists, who prioritize the sanitary and religious amenities more in their visits.

Another interesting finding is that the culinary and handcraft aspects had a moderate score, in contrast to the field observations that highlight the primary role of culinary

experiences to attract visitors. This shows the complexity in assessing the perspective from local versus outsiders. For the locals, the food offered at the event is not seen as a unique point because it has been part of their daily consumption, although some visitors come to enjoy the food instead of the race. This indicates that Pacu Jawi has been seen more as local entertainment rather than a tourist attraction. Regarding souvenirs, there are no special handicraft products associated with Pacu Jawi. People commonly just buy roasted peanuts to be carried home.



Figure 7. Fried peanuts or roasted peanuts are considered the signature souvenirs of the Pacu Jawi event.

Source: Field documentation

4.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from both theoretical frameworks in this study indicate that Pacu Jawi's sustainability resulted more from emotional and hedonistic motivations than from rational calculation. Both participants and visitors showed a high level of emotional satisfaction (all above 4.0), demonstrating a strong "emotional contract" among stakeholders. Nonetheless, the limitation in reciprocal knowledge exchange and tourists' engagement implies that Pacu Jawi has not yet been a fully developed tourism destination that can accommodate non-local visitors.

This comes with a paradox that Pacu Jawi is a strong cultural attraction with its authenticity, but this is also limiting its potential to a broader audience. The predominance of the Minangkabau ethnicity (94%) as the audience and the low active participation from the tourists indicate that the level of the event is at community-centered entertainment and has not been developed to be more structured and inclusive.

V. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research showed how Pacu Jawi in Nagari Tuo Pariangan stands as a local tradition that is able to resist global homogenizing forces through strong community engagement that preserves cultural authenticity while generating economic resilience. This tradition achieves an exceptional authenticity score with 4.83 while creating a thorough economic system which spans five different sectors to validate quality tourism's roles as a preservation mechanism and a catalyst for its development. A paradigmatic model of responsive and inclusive community participation principles was shown by the involvement of the government, ninik mamak (traditional leaders), and the youth, without putting aside the importance of adapting to modern needs.

Empirical findings revealed that Pacu Jawi has remained sustainable thanks to what this study identifies as an “emotional contract” among stakeholders, not utilitarian tourism. This term refers to a shared commitment based on cultural pride, community identity, and hedonistic satisfaction. High hedonistic satisfaction scores (>4.0) across all stakeholder groups, combined with practitioners' profound cultural pride (5.0) and visitors' emotional gratification (4.31), demonstrated that the tradition has been successful in creating meaningful experiences that outweigh economic considerations. This confirmed the theoretical premise that cultural persistence is deeply tied to a shared collective identity formation, in which emotional and affective rewards compensate for limitations in other functional aspects.

Nevertheless, this study found a critical “authenticity paradox” whereby informal organization, community-centered focus, and traditional infrastructure are the factors that both ensure Pacu Jawi's cultural integrity and limit its accessibility to gain diverse visitor segments and the potential of cross-cultural engagement. The wide gap between high authenticity perception (4.83) and low visitor engagement (2.86), combined with significant gaps in reciprocal knowledge exchange (2.8), revealed what this study calls “sustainable insularity”. While protecting the cultural attraction from commodification, this state limits its potential for educational tourism, cultural diplomacy, and broader economic development.

The domination of local visitors (94% Minangkabau ethnicity) and low interpretive program implied that the tradition serves more as community entertainment rather than fully developed cultural tourism. Despite field evidence of food's attraction role, the moderate score of culinary tourism highlighted the challenge of introducing and improving existing cultural assets from both local and outsider perspectives. Limited infrastructure, although tolerated by local audiences, creates barriers for non-local tourists who demand more comprehensive facilities for comfortable experiences. These reports contribute to cultural tourism literature by providing an example of how successful cultural preservation and economic development are not contradictory objectives when community participation is rooted in authenticity. Pacu Jawi provides valuable insights for communities aiming to transform cultural practices into sustainable tourism assets without sacrificing cultural identity. The concepts of "emotional contracts" and "sustainable insularity" provide new theoretical frameworks to comprehend how traditional communities can maintain cultural agency in tourism development while navigating the tension between authenticity preservation and tourism accessibility.

To reach its full potential as quality tourism, Pacu Jawi, maintaining its authentic character, strategic interventions are required together with addressing interpretive programming development, sensitive infrastructure adaptation, cultural product expansion, cross-cultural engagement mechanisms, and stakeholder capacity building. These transformations, however, must honor traditional governance structures and decision-making processes in order to facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue and open broader economic opportunities. Finally, Pacu Jawi stands as testimony to traditional cultures' resilience and quality tourism's potential to provide both preservation and development goals when guided by responsive and inclusive community participation principles. Its further development will heavily depend on the community's ability to maintain this delicate balance while gradually opening pathways to enhance cross-cultural exchange and develop comprehensive tourism.

Most respondents perceive the Trans Sumatera Toll Road as effective in improving travel speed and convenience. However, concerns about affordability remain, with less than half of users considering the current tariff to be fair. This suggests that while many respondents acknowledge the benefits of the toll road, a significant share continues to view the cost as burdensome. Comparative evidence also indicates that the relative cost of using toll roads in Sumatera is higher than in several other regions and countries, which may contribute to these perceptions of limited affordability.

The analysis shows that willingness to pay varies across user groups. Occasional travelers, who place higher value on time savings and comfort, are generally more willing to pay higher toll rates. In contrast, frequent users are more sensitive to toll prices because of the cumulative cost of regular travel. These differences indicate that policies designed to improve affordability, such as targeted discounts or flexible pricing schemes, could be more effective in encouraging consistent use of toll roads.

Perception and willingness to pay are related but not always aligned. While many users recognize the benefits of the toll road, they remain cautious about paying higher rates, especially for frequent use. Acceptability, which is often associated with perceptions of fairness and public investment, does not always translate into a higher willingness to pay. Instead, actual payment behavior appears to be influenced by income level, travel habits, and budget considerations.

Regression analysis further highlights that clarity of information is the only factor consistently linked to both positive perceptions and higher willingness to pay. Income is associated with perceived effectiveness, while perceived affordability is more strongly influenced by residence and trip purpose. Frequency of toll road use also plays an important role, suggesting that situational and informational factors have greater influence than basic demographic characteristics.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that communication and pricing strategies need to be adjusted to reflect local perceptions of value and affordability. Strengthening transparency, ensuring that information is clearly conveyed, and taking into account the needs of frequent and cost-conscious users may help enhance public acceptance and utilization. In addition, promoting the broader benefits of toll road infrastructure, including safety, comfort, and travel reliability, could help foster more positive user attitudes over time. Overall, the results of this study highlight the importance of a user focused approach in toll road planning and management. While continued infrastructure investment is vital, achieving long term acceptance and consistent use is likely to rely on a balanced combination of clear communication, adaptive pricing, and responsiveness to local travel patterns.

This study was limited to individual users and employed quantitative methods to identify general patterns. The use of an online survey may have affected sample diversity, as responses were more likely to come from urban and digitally connected participants. Future research could include freight and commercial users or apply qualitative methods to explore broader perspectives. Despite these limitations, the findings provide an initial foundation for understanding how people in outer island regions interpret new toll systems and offer insights for policies that aim to balance financial sustainability with public trust.

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